THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

TO HAVE DONE WITH THEORY?

BAUDRILLARD, OR THE LITERAL CONFRONTATION WITH REALITY

THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

Luca Zazzi

2023

ABSTRACT

Eluding the temptation to reinterpret Jean Baudrillard once more, this work started from the ambition to consider his thought in its irreducibility, that is, in a radically *literal* way. Literalness is a recurring though overlooked term in Baudrillard's oeuvre, and it is drawn from the direct concatenation of words in poetry or puns and other language games. It does not indicate a realist positivism but a principle that considers the metamorphoses and mutual alteration of things in their singularity without reducing them to a general equivalent (i.e. the meaning of words in a poem, which destroys its appearances).

Reapplying the idea to Baudrillard and finding other singular routes through his "passwords" is a way to short-circuit its *reductio ad realitatem* and reaffirm its challenge to the hegemony of global integration. Even in the literature dedicated to it, this exercise has been rarer than the 'hermeneutical' one, where Baudrillard's oeuvre was taken as a discourse to be interpreted and explained (finding an equivalent for its singularity).

In plain polemic with any ideal of conformity between theory and reality (from which our present conformisms arguably derive, too), Baudrillard conceived thought not as something to be verified but as a series of hypotheses to be repeatedly radicalised – he often described it as a "spiral", a form which challenges the codification of things, including its own. Coherent with this, the thesis does not consider Baudrillard's work either a reflection or a prediction of reality but, instead, an out-and-out *act*, a precious singular object which, interrogated, 'thinks' us and our current events 'back'.

In the second part, Baudrillard's hypotheses are taken further and measured in their capacity to challenge the reality of current events and phenomena. The thesis confronts the 'hypocritical' position of critical thinking, which accepts the present principle of reality. It questions the interminability of our condition, where death seems thinkable only as a senseless interruption of the apparatus. It also confronts the solidarity between orthodox and alternative realities of the COVID pandemic and the Ukrainian invasion, searching for what is irreducible to the perfect osmosis of "virtual and factual".

Drawing equally from the convulsions of globalisation and the psychopathologies of academics, from DeLillo's fiction and Baudrillard's lesser-studied influences, this study evaluates the irreversibility of our system against the increasingly silent challenges of radical thought. It looks for what an increasingly pessimistic late Baudrillard called 'rogue singularities': forms which, often outside the conventional realms one would expect to find them, constitute potential sources of the fragility of global power.

'To have done with theory' does not mean abandoning radical thought and, together with it, the singularity of humanity. It means, as the thesis concludes, the courage to

leave conventional ideas of theory and listen to less audible voices which, at the heart of this "enormous conspiracy", whisper — as a mysterious lady in Mariupol did to Putin — "It's all not true! It's all for show!".

LAY SUMMARY

Jean Baudrillard was a highly unconventional thinker whose theories of current societies were often considered inaccurate, exaggerated, or irresponsible. Surprisingly, he took these reactions as proof of the success of his writings. He claimed that those were the qualities of the contemporary world after it liquidated the principles of reality as it was conceived until around a century ago. As we experience it in the different domains of our life, which are all virtually 'public', there is no limit to its singularity becoming virtually real. This unlimited potentiality is the new character of our reality: allowing and encouraging the automatic virtualisation and codification of everything. In the perfectly integrated interface of life and its double, we enter what Baudrillard calls integral reality. Nothing is 'really' left outside it since the virtual operation can absorb any form of life and thought. For the same reason, it is a virtually complete reality that plunges into absurdity and uncertainty: it can now only be verified by itself. This poses vital questions about the very existence of radical theory. This study examines how Baudrillard discovers and develops another logic of how things appear and disappear according to singular forms that challenge the laws of reality. At the same time, it is an attempt to read Baudrillard according to these other rules and not merely as a conceptual and discursive reality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Until Death or Silence: Baudrillard's Confrontation with Reality

> "Generally, people think […] that radicalism is a privilege of youth or the illusion of youth. In fact, radicalism means going to the root of things, casting reality into doubt or stripping it down. I'm not talking about the accumulation of experience: radicalism isn't knowing more and more about the real but going beyond it" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 175).

> "There is no real, there never was a real" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 138)

To introduce the sense of this thesis, one could start with the simple observation that Baudrillard's works rarely contain canonical introductions. When they do so, they immediately enounce the core of the thought expressed in the work. In the 'paradoxically retrospective' *Passwords* (2003b, p. vii), Baudrillard declares that the title describes "quite well a quasi-initiatory way of getting inside things" (*Ibid.*, p. ix). His principal material, "words", are not considered representations of ideas but "bearers and generators of ideas" — almost as if ideas were the effects of words and not vice versa.

> "That [words] have a life of their own and, hence, are mortal is evident to anyone who does not claim to possess a definitive form of thought, with ambitions to edify. And this is my own case. There is in the temporality of words an almost poetic play of death and rebirth: successive metaphorizations mean that an idea becomes more — and something other — than itself: a 'form of thought'" (*Ibid.*).

The primacy of words in their materiality and singularity is a first declination of what we will observe numerous times, and which constitutes the central theme of this thesis: Baudrillard's interest in recapturing "the trace of the original disorder, the material, objectal vehemence of things without qualities, the erotic potency of a senseless world"

8

(Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 87). The enterprise of reality turned technical and operational aims at destroying the vital ambivalence of the world and its appearances, as everything is coded and finds an automatic equivalent (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 17). If there is a hope to 'ruin' this integration by writing, Baudrillard bets, this lies in "taking the world for the world". This allows thought to become "again, in an immanent way, a 'thing among things'" (*Ibid.*, p. 88). Otherwise, considered as the metalanguage that represents their reality, thought and theory participate in the hegemony of reality itself (Baudrillard, 1996a, p. 24), in the "discursive order" that works by "*equivalence and accumulation*" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 205).

The centrality of another, "literal order (*reversibility and dissemination*)" (*Ibid.*) is the hypothesis that allows Baudrillard to formulate his challenge toward the hegemony of reality and 'realist' theories. Baudrillard's form of thinking and writing is a direct, *material* attack, and never a simple discourse on them — that is why Mark Guillaume argues that "to read, to be seduced by Jean Baudrillard, we first need to learn his language [...] but also seize the philosophical singularity of his position" (Guillaume, 2019, p. 9)[1]. The absence of introductions reflects the difficulty of introducing a thought which aims to "become consubstantial with the surrounding world", "a thing among things" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 100). In other words, Baudrillard's pivotal reference is not a history of ideas or a discourse he articulates repeatedly in his texts. On the contrary, his theory's reference is the direct "confrontation" and "antagonism" it aims to establish with "the object", with "the real" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 29).

This conception echoes Heidegger's approach to *Nietzsche*: "'Nietzsche' — the name of the thinker stands as the title for the matter of his thinking. The matter, the point in question, is in itself a confrontation. (literally, 'the thing of his thought', Heidegger, 1991a, p. xxxix). If speaking of Nietzsche meant speaking of his confrontation "with all Western thought", it also implied confronting Nietzsche's confrontation (*Ibid.*, pp. 4-5). The same can apply to this thesis: the direct and radical confrontation with reality through Baudrillard, and that with the object 'Baudrillard' itself, become our primary, double theme. Precisely, Baudrillard considers "confrontation" his primary reference:

> "So it's no longer much the real or reality as a reference, but rather the reference would be the confrontation itself, the antagonism between the object and theory. I don't think the purpose of theory is to reflect reality, nor do I think its reference should be the history of ideas. We

---

[1] As for all other books not published in English, the translations are mine.

need something more adventurous, more direct, more aggressive if you like" (Baudrillard, 2015, pp. 29–30)

Indeed, Baudrillard's distinctiveness compared to all other contemporary theorists of society is not even a critical pessimism — that pessimism which invests a part of reality in the name of what it should be. For a start, we could say that Baudrillard practices a form of pessimism without consolation — "*un 'pessimisme lucide'*", as he wishes one of his most refreshing interpreters in a letter (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 209). But that would not be enough. Moreover, in the art of seeing "where the night of human condition stands" (Ceronetti, 2009, p. 50) — Cioran and his "urgency of the worst" (Cioran, 2012), Anders' "antiquatedness of humanity" (Anders, 1956, 1980)[2] or Ceronetti's "*Tragico Tascabile*" ["Pocket Tragic"] (Ceronetti, 2015), have preceded and equalled Baudrillard in denunciatory harshness. Tangentially, they figure among the few authors mentioned by the citations-sparing Baudrillard.

Considering Baudrillard a critical thinker is even misleading since he opposed an openly destructive and challenging attitude to the deconstructive-constructive dialectic of critique (Baudrillard, 1996a, p. 25). What makes him controversially unique — or singular, as he would prefer — is a stubborn conviction that all this 'misery' is not *at all* what it seems, that what exists is, here and now, immanently dual and reversible. The misery of reality depends on the conviction that reality is all that is, that the ultimate dimension of things is their reality. On the contrary, things are always already something else — more and less — than their reality: they are already 'self-revolutionised', one could say, insofar as they remain "ambiguous" and "undecipherable". The illusion of their "totally deciphered" reality (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 46) is the 'metaphysical' ideology behind our world, which Baudrillard aims to expose. In this way, Baudrillard adds what, according to Ceronetti, is missing in the "isolated intelligence" of "today's thinking world". Commenting on Adorno, Ceronetti argues that "we can predict centuries of endless analyses of hell, ever more refined and interesting". What we still miss is "a salve against the burns" (Ceronetti, 1993, p. 114), which, at the same time, avoids the equally "*infernal* [...] diversion" from what is (*Ibid.*, p. 69). Arguably, this is what we find in Baudrillard.

Rejecting both consolation and resignation, Baudrillard conceives his pessimism and scepticism in a literally *radical* way: thought cannot be content with a relative 'deconstruction', but only with a form of destruction that gets "to the root of things"

---

[2] Anders' main work is unpublished in English. For a discussion on a possible appropriate translation of the title, see the recent "*Günther Anders' Philosophy of Technology*" (Babich, 2022, p. 9).

(Baudrillard, 2017, p. 175). *Radicality consists in not accepting anything which can be further reduced until one comes across the irreducible.* This type of thought (for Baudrillard, thought in general) cannot admit stopping at a given reality if it identifies that reality as an operation or a construction of a more fundamental process. This can only be revealed in a confrontation without regard, direct and implacable, a duel until death (symbolic or not). "Confrontation", as Heidegger wrote, "is genuine criticism. It is the supreme way, the only way, to estimate a thinker truly. In confrontation we undertake to reflect on his thinking and to trace it in its effective force, not in its weaknesses". The ultimate purpose is that "through the confrontation we ourselves may become free for the supreme exertion of thinking" (Heidegger, 1991a, pp. 4–5).

There can be a radical confrontation with reality (and Baudrillard) if an alterity between the object and our consideration of it is maintained. To challenge reality is possible if we do not coincide with it, that is if our consciousness alters the world as the world alters our consciousness (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 39). In sociological terms, the conflict exists until the human being is a part of society while simultaneously confronting society and its totalising tendency (Simmel, 1971, p. 15). Otherwise, the individual becomes entirely adjusted and subjected to reality, as "all consideration of the dual and the insoluble" is eliminated (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 68). At that point, Adorno would have said, the substance of social reality coincides with ours (Adorno, 1974, p. 17) — who could deny that, today, the 'substance' of our individual lives is a virtual reality toward which everything seems to tend inexorably?

Baudrillard's thought is mainly concerned with this hypothesis, particularly considering the total automatisation of representation, which does not leave any space for subjectivity and its alteration of reality (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 45). The problem of a confrontation with a "computerized, digital, virtual" reality that already represents and critiques itself without us (*Ibid.*) has never been more dramatic and urgent. This urgency increases as the problem of confronting reality becomes more and more unproblematic (as it is technically taken care of) and, therefore, materially *untimely*. In a situation that expels humans from the representation of reality, questioning what becomes of our thought is more urgent than ever. As Agamben would say, "it is only when something has passed and has seen its time that it becomes truly interesting": only then can we grasp "the indestructible" (Agamben, 2018a, p. 6). In the extreme condition we find ourselves, we can perhaps see the indestructible and irreducible element of the human and its thought. Otherwise, we might as well have done with theory and thought altogether.

Knowing how the thinker Baudrillard conceived an uncompromising confrontation with present reality is essential to understanding how to confront the 'object' Baudrillard. The first element lies in his idea of radicalism anticipated above, which implies the notion of irreducibility. We must briefly go back to Baudrillard's interpretation of Mauss and the *potlatch* in primitive cultures (Mauss, 1990). Following Lévi-Strauss's idea that "wild thought" is a different and in no way inferior *logic* compared to the techno-scientific one (Lévi-Strauss, 2021; Latouche, 2019, p. 75), Baudrillard considers *symbolic*

exchange the most basic form of exchange. Successive economies of exchange, he thought, continue to imply a symbolic dimension. When they ignore it, they are still 'haunted' and threatened by its blowback in unpredictable and possibly more violent forms (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 1). From this idea, we obtain the defining title of Baudrillard's 1976 work *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. In detail, the symbolic exchange is a 'social' relationship in which one party challenges the other to respond to a gift. To establish the symbolic supremacy of one party, it requires that the stakes are raised until the other cannot reply and, virtually, until death. In other words, we could say that symbolic exchange aims to conceive an unexchangeable gift that amounts to the liquidation of the parties.

Even the relationship between theory and its object is a form of exchange, and the most radical way to conceive it is, arguably, as a mortal symbolic challenge. That is one of the keys to considering *Baudrillard's radicalism, which can only stop at the irreducible point at which either the system of reality collapses or theory goes silent.* Its early manifesto can be found in these words: "*To defy the system with a gift to which it cannot respond save by its own collapse and death*" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 37). This renders Baudrillard's thought incompatible with "the dominant form that Deleuze calls dogmatic (or critical) thought, which, until Nietzsche, was the model for a philosophy that accepted that reality is rational and therefore 'exchangeable' with thought" (Guillaume, 2019, p. 9). For Baudrillard, who keeps symbolic exchange as guiding principle, "a sovereign thought cannot be exchanged for anything and remains doomed to irreducible uncertainty" (*Ibid.*). In his own words, "[t]he uncertainty of thought lies in the fact that it cannot be exchanged either for truth or for reality" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 3). This is the price it must pay for its irreducibility. While admitting this precarious condition, this framework of thought immediately disqualifies an evaluation of Baudrillard in the name of the adherence to a "truth" or a "reality". What we can measure is, instead, the potential of its challenge to reality and its automatic representations — most of all, the challenge to their perfect integration.

Considering Baudrillard's work with equal irreducibility, this thesis's central research question can be formulated as follows: "Has Baudrillard's radical theory succeeded in bringing the system of reality to the point of collapse, or has it failed and gone silent instead?". The development of this question consists of a repeated radicalisation of Baudrillard's theses, measuring them against the recent developments of reality and ascertaining their vitality.

Baudrillard's Sovereign Radicalism and Those Who Might (Not) Survive It

> "The Murngin of Arnhem Land in Australia believe in a more personal but equally profitable relationship between the killer and the killed. The spirit of the slain man enters the body of the slayer, who then not only acquires double strength, but actually becomes larger" (Canetti, 1962, p. 252).

The problem of comparing Baudrillard to other influential contemporary voices to show the reason to revisit his thought is not a banal one. Baudrillard had a peculiar, literally 'undisciplined' approach toward theoretical sources or traditions of thought. "Going through all the disciplines to arrive at the enigma of their object. Using them in a transversal, allusive, metaphorical, elliptical, ironic mode — not realist, not objective, not methodical, not referential", we read in the coda of *Paroxysm* (Baudrillard, 1998a, p. 113). Therefore, one must bear in mind that a rigorous canonical approach — anything close to an academic consideration — toward other texts and thinkers is absent from Baudrillard's work. This complicates its contextualisation and comparison with other contemporary thinkers and requires an equally 'elliptical' strategy. It also involves the anticipation of Baudrillard's peculiar conception of radical theory.

"Jean Baudrillard", as François L'Yvonnet correctly points out, "makes a mercenary (or contraband) use of the main texts" (L'Yvonnet, 2013, p. 15). The same expression is found in *Passwords*, where Baudrillard defines words as "passers" ['*passeurs*', literally 'smugglers'] of ideas (Baudrillard, 2003b, pp. ix–x). The "fantasy of every theorist, every philosopher", he argues, is thinking to "advance by ways of ideas" when, in fact, "it is also words themselves which generate or regenerate ideas, which act as 'shifters'" (*Ibid.*). This shows that Baudrillard privileged the deviations imposed by the object, of language in its materiality, over the discursive order of the author-subject.

The "poetic play" of words in their *material literalness* and uncertain possibilities *is in no way less important than the reality of what they signify* (i.e. the theoretical discourse they refer to). On the contrary, Baudrillard considers the resistance to signification found in the material appearance of ideas decisive. Returning to the literalness of words means rejecting any "definitive form of thought" (*Ibid.*) and dismantling the author-subject's pretensions. It also means annihilating what an academic school made of the work, reactivating a sovereign singularity of thought.

In line with Heidegger's idea of "genuine criticism" (Heidegger, 1991a, p. 4), Baudrillard adopts this idea to attack the thinkers he esteems the most — those who constitute his theoretical background. The confrontation with them is a seamless demolition of the limits of their theory and a radicalisation of their form of thinking. In other words, Baudrillard asks how the spirit of a thinker can be further developed, even to overcome the limitations that the thinker imposed on their discourse. Baudrillard summarises his objection in the following way:

> "The logic of representation — of the duplication of its object — haunts all rational discursiveness. Every critical theory is haunted by this surreptitious religion, this desire bound up with the construction of its object, this negativity subtly haunted by the very form it negates" (Baudrillard, 1975, pp. 50–51).

13

Baudrillard suggests that a radical thinker must always beware of not re-presenting[3] the logic of the object criticised. In the illustrative *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard considers one of the essential thinkers of his background, Marx (on his importance for the development of Baudrillard, see Gane, 1991b, pp. 26–30). The accusation is that Marx shaped "a radical critique of political economy […] still in the form of political economy" (Baudrillard, 1975, p. 50)instead of going further and also attacking the logic of political economy itself. In other words, Marx deconstructed the contents (the way political economy is organised in capitalist society) but not the form (the reality of political economy itself as a form of organising the world). Specifically, Baudrillard considers a critique of political economy that does not also resolve "the concepts of production and labor" insufficient. Maintaining the reality of those concepts means maintaining the ideological structure of "the general system of value", that is, of the reality of capitalist society. Baudrillard goes as far as to affirm that "the only revolutionary perspective" would consist in breaking "the *mirror of production* in which all Western metaphysics is reflected" (*Ibid.*, pp. 46-47).

This indicates the range of Baudrillard's work. The sense of revisiting it consists in *revisiting a form of thought that aims to put the entirety of Western thought (gone global) into question, to the point of questioning the essential dogma that reality is the most fundamental state of things.* The protest against the 'definitiveness' of reality, including the reality of discourse, is the first element of singularity that characterises Baudrillard's radicalism. When it comes to Baudrillard's contextualisation, this suggests rejecting the more facile chronological or schematic categorisations within the post-structuralist or even post-modernist circles[4]. Considering its true singularity, we can see that Baudrillard's thought continues another philosophical-theoretical trajectory. It is the one that, after Hegel and most notably with Nietzsche and Heidegger, attempted a radical demolition of Western metaphysics — which is, at the same time, the reality of the West that colonised the rest of the world, too.

Interestingly, while attacking Marx, Baudrillard explains that this is what Marx did with Feuerbach and what, we could add, he should have done with himself. Marx saw that "after Feuerbach the critique of religion was basically completed" and that it was "necessary to move resolutely to a different level: precisely to the critique of political economy", which would have brought out "the true contradictions" of "the problem of

---

[3] In the literal etymological sense of "*re-presentation*, a making present again" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 8)

[4] On Baudrillard's "ironic relation to structuralism and poststructuralism", and his hostility to "postmodernism", see for example the conclusion to *Baudrillard's Bestiary* (Gane, 1991b, pp. 157–160)

religion" (*Ibid.*, p. 51). However, while he completed this step, Marx did not apply the same ideas to his own "critique of political economy", which, after him — Baudrillard argues — is also *"basically completed"*. For this reason, Baudrillard finds it necessary to "move to a radically different level that, beyond critique, permits the definitive resolution of political economy", that is, "that of symbolic exchange and its theory" (*Ibid.*).

The model for the passage to this different order of things can be found at the end of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* in Baudrillard's analysis of Saussure's *Anagrams* ('The Extermination of the Name of God', in Baudrillard, 1993b, pp. 195–238). It is a project which Saussure abandoned, as he could not fit it into his overall linguistic theory. Baudrillard defines it as "the fundamental discovery" for "the deconstruction of the sign and representation" and "a site" within language "of the extermination of value" (*Ibid.*, p. 195). We will delve into the specifics of this idea in the next section in more depth. Its consideration is arguably the 'secret' of Baudrillard and the proposed contribution of this project. For what concerns Baudrillard's unique radicalism: toward Saussure, we observe a strategy analogous to the one toward Marx. Baudrillard radicalises an abandoned hypothesis found in Sausssure's notebooks to liquidate Sausssure's linguistics and affirm the sovereignty of a poetic, literal order over the discursive order of signification.

In these examples, the bipolar confrontation comprises both a demolition and a radicalisation of a thought. It is what the Australian "Murngin" believe happens when the "slayer" interiorises the strength of the "slain": the incorporation of Marx's thought's radical potential 'enlarges' the body of Baudrillard's thought (on the analogy, see Canetti, 1962, p. 252). Even in this case, Baudrillard continues what, for instance, Heidegger intended to do with Nietzsche (Heidegger, 1991a, pp. 4–5) or, even more evidently, Nietzsche did with Schopenhauer (Simmel, 1991, pp. 3–14). As Giorgio Colli[5] writes about "the critique of compassion", "Nietzsche directs toward Schopenhauer a more profound vision that comes to him from Schopenhauer himself" (Colli, 1977, pp. 181–182). Or, as he writes on "the advantage of history" for life, Nietzsche attempts "to evade Schopenhauer's desperate vision by means of weapons offered by Schopenhauer himself" (Colli, 1980, p. 52).

Baudrillard continued to do so with his other 'masters', most notably Saussure, Freud and Foucault (but also Lacan and others) in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* and *Forget*

---

[5] As we will see below in greater depth, Giorgio Colli was a high-profile Italian philosopher and editor of the first version of Nietzsche's *opera omnia*.

Foucault. Moreover, since many contemporary theories share the fundamental presuppositions of those 'mother theories', Baudrillard's radicalisation is paradigmatic for those, too. Among the contemporary voices we will examine, we can mention Agamben, who reproduces Foucault's biopolitical view of current societies (Foucault, 2003, pp. 243–245) quite directly (e.g. Agamben, 2016, 2021d, 2021a). The other prominent example is Zizek, who adopts a dialectical view based on the supposed overcoming (in a peculiarly communist sense) of the reality of capitalism (e.g. see the recent Žižek, 2021). These two voices also appear in a 2003 interview as a rare indication of Baudrillard's contemporary readings; therefore, they occupy a special place among those we will consider.

> "I read things that come out, but in a very unorganized way — I don't have any set reading. I stopped reading Bourdieu, I admire Derrida but it's not my thing, and the same goes for the 'sub-Derrideans'. There are some interesting writers – I like what Agamben writes, and also Žižek, who's not at all known in France. [...] I share the '*feeling*' of what he writes, whilst not agreeing with him at all. You can question it all: he wants to keep a sort of dialectic [...]" (Baudrillard, 2017, pp. 199–200).

In general, if we take these and other more or less contemporary theories, what renders them incompatible with Baudrillard is that they start from reality. Reality remains the elemental state of things. On the contrary, Baudrillard starts from the hypothesis of reversibility: reality is already reversed, is already 'nothing'. Theory must assume its destiny and be an agent of the "continuation of the Nothing" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 61) so that no reality whatsoever might pass for all that is[6] — totalitarian or integral, as it seems to happen today. From this perspective, most theories remain monist and edifying — they believe that there is a reality (or real configuration) and, possibly, it must be changed, corrected, or overturned with another one. In doing so, they cannot formulate the hypothesis of an absolute reality, which has integrated resistance and critique in the form of one of the infinite variants of its code. Ironically, Agamben publishes his radical analyses on a blog…

In this way, their target remains, for instance, the capitalistic configuration of reality or the media-controlled version of reality. However, these different configurations of

---

[6] It is the same spirit that animates Baudelaire's idea of modernity, which Baudrillard considered "more modern" than many later interpretations (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 148). Commenting on Baudelaire's consideration of the metropolis — that is, the early materialisation of modern reality — the Italian philosopher Cacciari wrote: "The great city, its potent complex, are not *all*; however one lives in its *Unheimliches* [Uncanny], this life is not the life of the whole" (Cacciari in Benjamin, 2011, p. XL).

reality do not affect the totalitarianism of reality itself, which is far worse than any other — Baudrillard even says that we end up "wanting it all to be [...] taken in hand by capitalist power, to slow its exponential development, to escape the ecstasy of (free, secular and obligatory) communication" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 44). Indeed, by offering *virtually* (read both 'potentially' and 'abstractly') any configuration in a utopia of freedom without contradictions, they render resistance *metaphysically impossible* — a far worse prospect than capitalism, its crises and contradictions.

Thus, in his extreme and almost utopian dualism, Baudrillard does not believe in edifications or normativity — "philosophy must beware of the wish to be edifying" (Hegel, 1977, p. 6) — all of which are just extensions of the reality principle. Rather than focusing on the restricted realm of the norms, he focuses on the general domain of the rules: the rules of the game that define reality itself. He hypothesises that the *rule* of duality, and not unity, lies at the foundation of things: what we consider reality is, in fact, already reversed in the operation of thought. We can do our best to eliminate duality, but — Baudrillard repeats until his last work — it will fatally resurrect in other forms (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 69). The potential and weakness of Baudrillard's work derive from this 'mother hypothesis'. Thanks to its incompatibility with any totalitarian reality (of contemporary theories and society in general), its revisitation can detect the condition we find ourselves in.

We could add this to summarise his distance from other contemporary thinkers with one line. Most theories considered below think the resolution lies in some 'hereafter', a dimension different from the current state of things. For Baudrillard, however, the resolution of reality is already here, in the "reciprocal alteration between matter and thought" (Baudrillard, 2001a, pp. 30–31) — effectively, the actual meaning of analysis is 'dissolution'. Even theories which think to represent the world participate in this radical duality of "the world as it is", which ineluctably "puts an end to the real world" (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 99). Its resolution lies in recognising that thought constantly alters and is altered by the world. This alteration saves us from the absolutism of reality and makes thought itself sovereign.

So, from this point of view, the defence of reality lies precisely in those thoughts that do not see this immanent resolution. Wrongly aiming, they work for reality instead of illusion. Indeed, to stand on the side of reality, whatever that may be, is to stand on the side of the reality principle. Since contemporary theories have not gotten rid of these conceptual horizons he showed to be inconsistent, the *pensée-Baudrillard* remains relevant. It literally *raises up* ('*relevare*') what is not radical in 'radical theory' — what, in other words, still awaits *ex-termination*.

The Absence of Literalness: How This Project Aims to 'Secrete Baudrillard's Secret'

> "Ideological and moralistic critique, obsessed with sense and content, obsessed with the political finality of discourse, never takes into account writing, the act of writing, the poetic, ironic, allusive force of language, of the juggling with sense. It does not see that the resolution of sense is to be found there — in the form itself, the formal materiality of expression" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 103, modified translation).

> "If language doesn't exist in its own right, if we don't take it in its materiality, its literalness, and treat it in its form, then all that it's trying to suggest to us, to signify to us, fails to get through" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 94).

The distinctive approach of this project consists in identifying and articulating a 'secret' which lies in plain sight, as it consists in both the content and form of Baudrillard's thought: *literalness* or *literality*. This section intends to establish its centrality in Baudrillard's view of his work and, conversely, its relative absence from the secondary literature.

Although Baudrillard writes explicitly of a "literal order" already in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 205), it must be noted that the terms 'literal' and 'literalness' are increasingly used in the last works, particularly in *Impossible Exchange* (Baudrillard, 2001a). In sum, the absence of the term itself cannot be used as a discriminating factor. Thus, this project looked for the literature that considered Baudrillard's form of thought (including its writing style, for instance) as a concrete element and material articulation of its radicality.

"Literalness is all", Baudrillard writes in a comment on the Pompidou Centre, arguing how we should 'read' architectural objects (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 184). In an interview included in *Fragments* ['*D'un Fragment L'autre*'], he affirms:

> "You have to get to the text itself, the factuality of language, which is not an imaginary. The concept of literalness seems very important to me, and not only for fragments. […] Literalness is the secret of a poem, but this goes also for all forms, for any phenomenon, beginning with events, even though it is always difficult to get back to their literalness. […] You have to take things in their singularity, and at the same time in their literalness" (Baudrillard, 2004a, pp. 29–30)

The high consideration Baudrillard has for this idea is indisputable. Nevertheless, in the literature devoted to him, it is rarely found as a crucial element — "as a demonstration in practice of forms of symbolic, non-accumulative cultural processes" (Gane, 1991b, p. 118). No substantial consideration of it in the peculiar sense presented here can be found in much of the English, French and Italian literature on Baudrillard. Literalness appears more frequently in the texts that consider the conception of the fetish (the "absolute object") Baudrillard inherits from Baudelaire's "absolute commodity" (Baudrillard, 1990b, pp. 146–150, 2001a, p. 170), an effective declination of the literal dimension applied to objects (most notably Gane, 2011; Angelucci, 2017). The other

consideration of literalness (often not mentioned as such) can be found in the analyses of Saussure's *Anagrams* in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Genosko, 1994, pp. 84–88; an exciting example of its application to Baudrillard's poems is Gane, 1991b, pp. 118–125). Apart from Mike Gane's peculiar sensitivity to this dimension, an appreciation of the literalness *in* and *of* Baudrillard seems more frequent in the French literature, perhaps for obvious reasons of actual or apparent proximity to 'the letter' (L'Yvonnet, 2013; Leonelli, 2007; Guillaume, 2019). Mike Gane underlines that, effectively, there is a problem with translation recognised by Baudrillard (Gane, 2000, p. 88). However, the actual translation operates regardless of the language of the interpretation. Thus, the inevitable metamorphoses of Baudrillard's thought must become an essential element of this study. Accordingly, the thesis will consider the works that better approximate this principle as its main terms of comparison.

Considering literalness as the secret theme and, most of all, the peculiar form of Baudrillard's theory also means answering the main objection directed to it. Perhaps Bourdieu formulated it most explicitly about Baudrillard's first work, *The System of Objects*. He called it "the record of projective test masquerading as a phenomenologico-semiological analysis", critiquing Baudrillard's failure in identifying objects as "objectified social (class) relations" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 569). In other words, to Bourdieu, Baudrillard seemed to practise a subjectivist exercise without objective foundation. The expression captures well a constant objection to Baudrillard's work, which will culminate with the accusation of "fashionable nonsense" in the famous book by Sokal and Bricmont, which consequently places Baudrillard among the "postmodern intellectuals" (Sokal and Bricmont, 1998). Judging his work by its verisimilitude with reality, all of these objections precisely miss the crucial feature of Baudrillard's innovative form, which aims to challenge that very framework those critiques evoke. Baudrillard's thought's absolute distance from the principles of reality and representation, on which the project returns multiple times, is a factual response to this critical literature.

Returning to Baudrillard, in the interview just mentioned, he argues that "any image whatever retains something savage and fantastical" which can be recovered by "intuition […] if it is taken literally". He calls the literal dimension, which bypasses meaning and all that we consider the reality of a thing, "the secret of the image" (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 184). This arguably applies to Baudrillard, too, as we ask how to approach him as an object of study. What is his "savage and fantastical" *literal* side that bypasses all of the possible meanings which have emerged and constitute the reality of the object Baudrillard? Moreover, 'literalness' seems to be a relatively well-kept secret within the works dedicated to him. As we delve into this peculiar idea and its theoretical-political sense, we also seek the reason for its relative absence — if it can be considered such.

First, we should remember that, in evoking a literal dimension, Baudrillard does not in any way conceive a form of positivism (see Clemens and Pettman, 2004, p. 43). Reality

taken literally is not reality reproduced as it comes to us — as that reproduction would include our representation of reality and, today, all the information apparatus that inevitably contaminates the event or even becomes the event itself (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 103). On the contrary, it is a way in which the positivity of any value and reality is continually dissolved by the work of language and thought (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 236). Taken literally, thought is an integral *part* of the world — a thing among other things. In no way can it be considered a meta-dimension excluded from the world.

Nevertheless, it is also a *counterpart*, a challenge to the world and, in this sense, an operator that makes the world more ambiguous and enigmatic. Even in its pure existence, thought complicates the world and its reality, adding a factor of deviation from its mere reproduction: it alters the world and is altered by it. The literal dimension is found in this mutual alteration.

However, as indicated above, Baudrillard's early idea of the literal order comes from considering Saussure's *Anagrams* (Starobinski, 1971). The technical details are not as important as the implications within and beyond language that Baudrillard claims to have discovered: that is, "the poetic", or "the literal order", "is a process of *the extermination of value*" (Baudrillard, 1993b, pp. 198, 205). In analysing the phonemes of some ancient Latin poems, Saussure found two laws ("The Law of the Coupling" and "The Law of the Theme-word") which constitute principles of extermination of "the values of language" and "signification (signifier, signified, expression, representation, equivalence)" (*Ibid.*, p. 198). In particular, these laws suggest that phonemes are either cancelled by a rigorous redoubling or "*diffracted* throughout the text", constituting two practical examples of symbolic exchange. While the first evokes the gift and counter-gift that cancel each other, the second echoes the dismemberment of "*God or a hero in the sacrifice*" (*Ibid.*, p. 199). What counts is "*nothing results or remains*", and this constitutes the "symbolic act" (*Ibid.*, p. 200): in the literalness of language, the signifying and representative values evaporate and disappear.

From this, Baudrillard considers the literal dimension as a precise art of making reality and its 'added values' disappear — "in contrast to science as a process of accumulation, the real *analytic* operation *eliminates its object*, which comes to an end in it" (*Ibid.* p. 204). However, it is also a way in which the subject, "far from attempting to master its object, accepts being analysed by it in return, in which movement the respective positions of each are irremediably dismantled" (*Ibid.*). The mutual alteration mentioned above is the site of literalness: nothing positivistic but a form of symbolic exchange — a duality(!) — that Baudrillard sees at the foundation of things, of the world as it is.

On the contrary, this modality is lost in the conceptions of thought and theory as meta-languages and representations of reality, destined only to reduplicate a restricted vision of the world (the realist one). These conceptions do not need Baudrillard's denunciation to disappear: they are immediately disqualified as obsolete and supplanted by the devices' "automatic writing of the world" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 92). Instead, to survive,

Baudrillard believes, we must play a different game that aims at an equally "automatic deprogramming of the world". The alteration of the literal dimension aims to dissolve "all the illusions which present themselves as truth (including that of reality)" (*Ibid.*) and reaffirm the irreducible illusoriness of the world.

Just pronouncing this idea, in a world that strives to clarify and realise everything, its strangeness is easily perceived. For this reason, Baudrillard's theory cannot be considered a fatalistic resignation to what is. He argues that "we have to want that literalness: we have to secrete that secret, we have to want to thwart the general aestheticisation and the mental technology of culture which are now upon us" (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 184). This is not a passive, fatalistic stance but an active pursuit of a, yes, *fatal* dimension of things, but in the sense of a logic immanent to them[7]. It is an intentional sabotage of reality and the network of meaning that sustains it and, using a Heideggerian term, 'enframes' things within it (Heidegger, 1977).

Furthermore, what Baudrillard wants to achieve via literalness is precisely the dimension of play, illusion, and appearances just analysed. Not casually, the inspiration comes from a form of play done with words: the quip or *Witz*. In *Remember Baudrillard*, Latouche dedicates a paragraph to this element just before the conclusion. In 'The Poetic Pleasure of Language', he points out that even his critics acknowledged Baudrillard's "beautiful command of language" (Latouche, 2019, p. 212). However, *how* that skill was considered is decisive. After all, the acknowledgement might also sound ironical… as if to say that Baudrillard *at least* writes beautifully.

On the same page, Latouche hints at this project's core interest: "Baudrillard repeatedly underlines that wordplay has to do with the '*trait d'esprit*' (the famous Freudian Witz), which by its use of the literalness of language makes sense explode" (*Ibid.*). Exactly this final remark is arguably essential: literalness is not simply a stylistic preference, nor is it a "visionary" choice "that brings the Nietzschean philosopher close to the poet and the oracle" (*Ibid.*, p. 213). Baudrillard clarified that he was "not a prophetic poet or anything" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 129). Instead, reaffirming the literal order means to side with the object and a conception of thought that aims to become an agent of the world's illusoriness against its forced realisation. This might also explain the prefigurative 'side-effects' of Baudrillard's writing, which he, nonetheless, always attributes to having abandoned "the trap of the subject thinking the world when he reflects, in a position of mastery, as the subject of knowledge". Intercepting and refracting the "inhuman"

---

[7] "I call this a fatal process in the sense that there is a definitive immanence of the image, without any possible transcendent meaning" (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 95).

dimension of the world requires conceiving "a duel" and a "dual circuit of thought" with "no privileged position" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 105). Only on the condition that I let myself be altered by it, the world will speak in what I say, as I remain a part of it, Baudrillard seems to think.

In another interview, Baudrillard completes the frame by specifying how that dimension of his thinking might be taken. "I always choose language as a metaphor. One doesn't know what comes from it when it can operate by itself, as the subject pulls itself back. One doesn't know what happens then. It's always surprising and has a deeper intensity than what happens through the subject" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 98). Clearly, language and its literal order ("when it can operate by itself") are an analogy for a general approach to things which privileges that same dimension. Turning to literalness, Baudrillard suggests that we do not know what will happen: we might obtain the same surprise we get from a quip — who does not know how playing on words can stupefy the speaker who pronounces them even more than those who hear it? This form of thought protects from the monotony of reality and its representation, resolving the two into a felicitous disappearance by creating "a void". "Reversibility is the only source of enjoyment" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 232) for two reasons. First, it relieves us of the irreversibility of reality, particularly in one that comes already reproduced and codified. Second, it dissolves the position of subjectivity, as we see things (including thought) functioning by themselves.

That is Baudrillard's access to literalness: an active short-circuiting of reality and the subject's intention, thanks to the surprise that language imposes on it. Playing on words ourselves, literalness allows us to access that 'illusory' (in the sense of playful) dimension of things that is, for Baudrillard, the fundamental one — the irreducible illusoriness of the world as it is, as a generator of unexpected deviations and surprises. For this reason, it is a form of protest and resistance 'distilled' from things themselves and almost miraculously bypassing the subject's intentionality through a (nonetheless!) active stance.

Applying this idea, we could say that literalness is inevitably present even in those works on Baudrillard that do not consider it explicitly, despite the author's intentions. We can observe how the "hard core of literalness in language" is more or less "instrumentalized as a means of communication" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 57). The problem of how to deal with Baudrillard without falling into this trap, the proposed contribution of this thesis in this area, is articulated throughout the following chapters.

Thesis Itinerary

The thesis comprises ten chapters in total. This chapter introduced the main research question: "Has Baudrillard's radical theory succeeded in bringing the system of reality to the point of collapse, or has it failed and gone silent instead?". Asking this question

required an introduction to the core issues of Baudrillard's thinking. As this chapter began to show, the reason to examine his work is not merely a niche interest in the author. Instead, Baudrillard is interesting so far as he practices an uncompromising form of radical thinking while he conceives reality in an equally extreme way.

In light of this, the second chapter analyses the theoretical and strategical motives behind these conceptions, identifying a fundamental dualism between a reality becoming "integral" and "the world as it is". This dualism is the antagonism between a vision of the world based on integration and homogenisation and the other based on irreducible illusoriness, duality and singularity. In this sense, Baudrillard's writing is an attempt to take the side of the world as opposed to that of a totalising reality, which codifies everything technologically. The chapter anticipates how he developed this antagonism and the different scenarios disclosed by his writings.

The third chapter examines *The Literal Method of This Study*. In Baudrillard's spirit, I have attempted to avoid presupposing a methodology or even the theoretical background of his thinking. Some substantial readings in philosophy and sociology have helped me to interpret and contextualise how Baudrillard's theories appeared. However, most of his theorisation's motives and principles were obtained by examining how the object diverted this study. The '*methodos*' is literally the *way* this study underwent its metamorphoses in the impact with Baudrillard. At the time, the chapter asks how the present takes a different, supposedly singular form as Baudrillard's theory alters its reality.

The fourth chapter, *Baudrillard as It Is*, deals with the problem of finding a way into Baudrillard's thought[8] by analysing both its reception and Baudrillard's retrospective consideration of his works. The issue of remembering or forgetting Baudrillard, along the lines of his famous pamphlet on Foucault, is articulated as the paradoxical question of authenticity. The response I gave is that Baudrillard's only authenticity lies in the further metamorphoses of his words and ideas. Considering the discussion in the third chapter, this is arguably the only way we can both radicalise Baudrillard and measure his untimely relevance in the present.

The fifth chapter, *The Irruption of Things*, focuses on Baudrillard's theoretical and literary metamorphosis at the end of the seventies. The volumes until *Symbolic Exchange and Death* prepare the definitive rejection of any theorisation centred on the subject, with the 'impossible' passage to the side of the object, the obliteration of references and the

---

[8] Hence the use of 'it' in the chapter's title.

development of a literal thought. Specifically, the chapter shows Baudrillard's reconsideration of the *form* of writing not only as a stylistic issue but as a metaphysical and strategic one. The radicalisation of Baudrillard's theory and its form is a material response to a reality that became even more extreme, a response which an exclusive focus on the contents could not detect.

The sixth chapter, *To Have Done with Criticism*, examines the difference between critical forms of thought and Baudrillard's radical thought. Although Baudrillard cannot entirely avoid denouncing reality, the true aim of his antagonism is a challenge to its principles. On the contrary, critical thought has to accept reality's basic logic to correct it. It aims to challenge the various configurations under which reality presents itself to make it somehow 'better'. However, whereas this could be radical under other regimes of reality, integral reality is indifferent to (if not pleased by) this deconstructive work, which it partially does itself through virtual codification. The chapter explains the motives behind Baudrillard's aversion to this form of thinking, defining the incompatibility with his "radical thought".

The seventh chapter, *Interminability and Death*, articulates the dualism between integral reality (or ultra-reality) and the world as that between an interminable horizon and various interruptions. From the intimate sphere to the social one, reality presents numerous forms of 'interminability'. From the technological possibilities of entertainment to the dreams of immortality, our current condition can be considered an endless connection. However, the potential faltering of the apparatus and our allergies (in the forms of exhaustion and burnout) signal that this scenario is also unbearable. The chapter articulates these abreactions as an effect of an all-positive universe devoid of any *otherness*. Simultaneously, it asks in what sense the latter (also in the form of death) remains a vital function for the symbolic equilibrium of the human.

The eighth chapter, *Interruptor-Events*, is a literal and symbolic analysis of two global events of the last years: the coronavirus emergency and the war in Ukraine. Their appearance can be seen materially as interrupting the interminable condition mentioned above. On the other hand, the responses to them might result in a reinforcement of integral reality and the global order. Thanks to this ambivalence, the chapter analyses the equal ambivalence of information and technologies in triggering the worst and screening us from it. In conducting this analysis, I will show that Baudrillard's theory can be used in a continued engagement with contemporary reality.

The ninth chapter, *Ultimate or Penultimate Prospect*, examines the outcomes of Baudrillard's trajectory chronologically and, most of all, logically. The core research question introduced in this chapter returns and is articulated in light of the whole thesis. As with all other themes, the issue of disappearance and the liquidation of singularity is considered within both contemporary reality and Baudrillard's work. Accordingly, the chapter attempts to radicalise the most extreme doubts that Baudrillard developed and left unanswered. The context is mainly the world's situation after the Twin Towers

attack, which, in Baudrillard's theory, functioned as a crystal-event that refracted the process of globalisation and its supposed collapse. The outer reaches of Baudrillard's thought touch upon topics still unsolved today. In particular, the chapter analyses the challenge between the global system and 'rogue singularities', which, as Baudrillard feared, seems to open the horizon of irreversibility of ultra-reality. The possible radical challenges — human or not — that the world and Baudrillard leave us with are evaluated.

The conclusion uses Baudrillard's disappearance and the appearance of silence as a literal object that helps us look retrospectively at the thesis and its outcomes. In this somewhat unconventional way, it reframes the questions that animated this study as it moves, with Baudrillard, toward its disappearance. The provisional conclusion confirms that Baudrillard challenges theory as such to undergo a radical metamorphosis. Thanks to the different rules examined in the thesis, we can now see this metamorphosis not as the elimination of theory but as the awareness that thought will only survive by assuming its radical change of form. The doubt remains on whether this form will be human or not.

INTEGRAL REALITY, RADICAL ILLUSION: AXIOMS OF BAUDRILLARD'S DUALISM

Introduction: A Deliberate Confusion?

To an extent, this second chapter is a continuation of the introduction and an anticipation of the themes developed in the following chapters. At the same time, it is a deeper examination of Baudrillard's *sui generis* phenomenology, which, with its counter-intuitive and interchangeable terminology, confused Baudrillard's critics. In particular, the chapter aims to dispute the idea of Baudrillard's theory as a denunciation of a lack of reality in the current world.

This paradigm materialised in "the New York painting movement of *Simulationists*" and the "*Matrix* movie" (Latouche, 2019, pp. 155–160). In the first case, Baudrillard's view was taken in a 'positive' way, as overcoming the problem of reality and disclosing new artistic potentialities. In the second case, simulation was taken as an indication of the falsehood and unreality of the current world, implying the existence of an authentic version of it.

Instead, Baudrillard explicitly argued that "the world has become real beyond our wildest expectations" so that we can "speak of an excess of reality" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 64). This excess, the excess of a reality accomplished technically (and virtually), amounts to an "unconditional simulacrum" (*Ibid.*, p. 65) because it has no other horizon than itself. While basing its functioning on the general codification of the universe (today, in digital form), reality ignores the fact that "the world [...] has no equivalent anywhere" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 3). For the reason that, as a whole, it cannot be verified (any verification is part of it), Baudrillard interprets the world as "a fundamental illusion" (*Ibid.*).

This cannot mean that the world is untrue or semblance since nothing can verify or 'un-verify' it. Instead, it implies a radical change of paradigm that most critics have not considered: *conceiving a horizon of the undecidability of reality and appearance, in which the two inevitably lose their old identities*. This is the most crucial premise to follow Baudrillard's hypotheses, which aim to reinvent another order of things accounting for these uncertain rules. Coherently, Baudrillard attempts to take the world as it is, in its literalness, which simultaneously means its total uncertainty and illusoriness. The requirement to conceive these two sides of the world together leads Baudrillard towards a dualistic view that renders all of his concepts provisional and ambivalent. After all, as Agamben showed, our grammar and reality share the same principles (Agamben, 2016).

This explains the difficulty in Baudrillard's attempt, which is based on reversibility rather than identity. Appearances describe the finite forms that exist in the world, a particular case of which is reality. Illusoriness is the broad horizon of these forms or rules, echoed in the 'ludic' etymology of *il-lusion* (literally 'putting into play'), whereas reality is their attempted liquidation. In the same way as reality, consciousness is seen as an element in the bigger game of the world: as it alters it, it is altered in return — for Baudrillard, this means the world thinks us back, rendering subject and object reversible, too. Thus, his *phenomenology* is also '*sauvage*' [wild], indicating this dual direction. That is why there is no chance of grasping the 'authentic' Baudrillard without abandoning the ideas of reality and verification and accepting to play these rules. His imposture from the realist perspective can only be evidence of his relevance against reality's fundamentalism. At the same time, as we will suggest, his theory seriously attempts to consider the singularity of our world, including that disclosed by physics.

After examining these unusual concepts and their 'hyper-political' implications, the chapter discusses the importance of pataphysics in Baudrillard as a form of thought that responds to the disappearance of metaphysics. Then, it considers the immoral optimism that Baudrillard's analyses potentially disclose. Finally, it adds further elements to the idea of literalness and anticipates the uncertain conclusion of Baudrillard's trajectory.

The Invention of Reality as the Progressive Dissolution of the World

> "Reality is nothing other than its own simulation" (Baudrillard, 1990c, p. 151).

> "I would even say that it is this superstitious belief in — this hysteresis of — the 'real' and the reality principle that is the true imposture of our times" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 23).

At the basis of Baudrillard's singular conception, we find an irresolvable dualism between reality and the radical illusion of the world. Reality is not conceived as a state of things — as we will see, this is what reality's 'ideology' would like us to believe. Quite differently, Baudrillard considers reality as a progressive operation that constructs a

mentally and practically manipulable order out of the impenetrable (and ineradicable) singularity of the world. The reality principle considers it insufficient for things to be as they are; instead, everything must find an equivalent — a double — that grounds and guarantees its reality. In this sense, reality is the progressive alienation of the world: "The real world begins, in the modern age, with the decision to transform the world, and to do so through science, analytical knowledge and the implementation of technology" (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 10). This happened, Baudrillard writes, citing Hannah Arendt, "with the invention of an Archimedean point outside the world (based on the invention of the telescope by Galileo and the discovery of modern mathematical calculation) by which the natural world is definitively alienated" (*Ibid.*, pp. 10-11). Baudrillard's position has a crucial consequence: already at its early appearance, reality reveals itself as a process of disappearance:

> "By their exceptional faculty for knowledge, human beings, while giving meaning, value and reality to the world, at the same time begin a process of dissolution ('to analyse' means literally 'to dissolve)" (*Ibid.*, p. 11).

However, this began long before modernity in a much more deep-rooted way:

> "[...] by representing things to [themselves], by naming them and conceptualizing them, human beings call them into existence and at the same time hasten their doom, subtly detach them from their brute reality" (*Ibid.*).

This is the root of a process that has continued to further stages of integration. In 2004, Baudrillard defined the one at which we find ourselves as "a kind of ultra-reality that puts an end to both [objective] reality and illusion" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 27). The other recurring term in the late texts is also "Integral Reality", often written in capitals, perhaps to underline its hegemonic character:

> "What I call Integral Reality is the perpetrating on the world of an unlimited operational project whereby everything becomes real, everything becomes visible and transparent, everything is 'liberated', everything comes to fruition and has a meaning (whereas it is in the nature of meaning that not everything has it). Whereby there is no longer anything on which there is nothing to say" (*Ibid.*, p. 17).

In Baudrillard's view, *"realising* the world" consists of "putting an end to the illusion of the world through technology" in the sense of both earlier technical mental-linguistic tools and properly called 'technologies'. This, clarifying many confusions around his theory, is "what simulation is about" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 17). Having said this, we will continue to investigate this process using the concept of reality, which — against many interpretations — ultimately coincides with that of simulation: "Reality is nothing other than its own simulation" (Baudrillard, 1990c, p. 151).

Returning to our examination, what has yet to emerge is what reality dissolves in its operation. Putting an end to the illusion of the world cannot mean overcoming a false world, as the reality principle would like us to believe. Instead, it means destroying the singular and ambiguous surface of appearances — *in which, importantly, the 'observer' is always implicated (!)* — turning it into different objects thanks to metaphysical-linguistical operators (concepts, categories, etc.). "The true revolution of the nineteenth century, of modernity, is the radical destruction of appearances, the disenchantment of the world and its abandonment to the violence of interpretation and of history" (Baudrillard, 1994a, p. 160). To realise the world means bringing it to visibility and rendering it representable, usable and exchangeable linguistically and practically: the singular and unrepeatable are replaced by the universal and repeatable. What, "before it assumes force of meaning" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 21), is the *singular* succession of appearances as it is, disappears into ever more sophisticated codes, of which the digital is the ultimate horizon. Baudrillard calls this horizon, where integration is virtually complete, and singularity disappears, integral or ultra-reality.

What we could call the banal illusion of reality is sustained by the appearance that this substitution itself *is* the world — implying that its operation successfully reduced and integrated 'all that is' into its reality. In fact, by its increasing codification, the world is known so far as it is increasingly alienated and liquidated: "conceptual invention is a critical threshold where things, reflected by the word that names them, both assume force of reality and begin to fade" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 107). Paradoxically, human beings know and manipulate things by renouncing them as they are. Signification is at the basis of this operation since the function of signs "is always a conjuring — both a conjuring up and a conjuring away: causing something to emerge in order to capture it in signs (forces, reality, happiness, etc.) and evoking something in order to deny and repress it" (Baudrillard, 1998b, p. 33).

Producing 'doubles' (names, concepts, codes) means introducing agents of disappearance. The operation never *replicates* things. Quite the contrary, it separates an irreducible world of appearances into signs and referents, language and reality. As Adorno wrote, "individual things in their isolation and separateness" are "precisely a product of the universal", that is, of concepts and categories we take for reality (Adorno, 1974, p. 71). No matter the high definition of the virtual replica, the singularity of the world is essentially incompatible with universalisation. That means that what signs and codes refer to is already a product of separation, of a literal *abstraction* rather than a representation.

> "One need only reflect that even if objects exist outside of us, we can know absolutely nothing of their objective reality. For things are given to us only through our representation. To believe that these representations and sensations are determined by external objects is a further representation" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 39).

29

The possibility of reality and representation depends on neglecting the world in this radical, irreducible illusoriness, where "consciousness is an integral part of the world and the world is an integral part of consciousness" (*Ibid.*). Baudrillard considers this duality inescapable, which means that the fundamental state of things cannot be that of reality. Moreover, it means that reality is the actual form of denialism toward things as they are — in this sense, a nihilistic enterprise. Indeed, reality comprises categories of thought (subjectivity, objectivity, causality, meaning and all other conceptual tools) that are exclusively the world seen from the subjective side. It does not consider the 'thought' coming from the other side, which primarily interests Baudrillard.

The World in Its Illusoriness: On the Radicality of Appearances

> "Illusion begets and sustains the world; we do not destroy one without destroying the other" (Cioran, 2012, p. 88).

> "There is not just the illusion of a real world, there is also that of a real subject of representation — and the two illusions, the objective and the subjective, are correlative. This is where the mystery lies. For the world does not exist in order for us to know it. It is not in any way predestined for knowledge. However, knowledge is itself part of the world, though precisely part *of the world in its profound illusoriness, which consists in having no necessary relation to knowledge*" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 40)

The radical illusoriness of the world is what appears once all additional values disappear: a "domain of pure appearance, of the world as it is (and not of the *real* world, which is only ever the world of representation), […] can emerge only from the disappearance of all the added values" (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 21). In this framework, pure appearances do not conceal reality; they are not 'semblances' without meaning. Instead, we should read the attribute 'pure' keeping the previously mentioned double illusion in mind: pure appearances are all that appears, including the consciousness that attempts to alienate appearances. That is why the enterprise of reality seems hopeless from the outset.

Indeed, the system of reality is a series of "simulacra" that produce a hierarchy of 'real' and 'semblance-like' appearances (see Baudrillard, 1983b) but which cannot "neutralize" or "abolish" them (Baudrillard, 2012, pp. 62–63). In this sense, a literal phenomenology, as Baudrillard conceives it, is a broader form of thought that considers the whole of "the sacred horizon of appearances" (Baudrillard, 1990c, pp. 53–59) and not their reduced version, that is, reality. The reality-operation is what renders it difficult to see that "the ineluctable dimension of each and every thing" is the surface of "pure appearance" (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 60). Instead, reality is only one of the possible forms appearances assume, forms charged with specific 'meanings' (in fact, Baudrillard uses the term 'sense') but appearances all the same — and is not the *sense* of reality itself

an illusory trick that can be reduced to a series of appearances, a sequence of signs?[9] To convey their capacity to create illusion and 'depth', Baudrillard refers to appearances as "superficial abyss" (Baudrillard, 1990c, p. 87), drawing an analogy with the surrealist painting technique of "the *trompe l'oeil*" (*Ibid.*, pp. 60-67)[10].

Of course, appearances have nothing to do with 'objects' in the conceptual sense but with the entire array of forms needed to construct both an object and the subjective consciousness experiencing them. The horizon of appearances, Baudrillard's fundamental dimension, is located at the intersection of the two, "at the meeting point of the human and the inhuman" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 106), where one is immersed into the other. Quoting Colli, Agamben calls this "the moment in which two entities are separated only by a void of representation" (Agamben, 2016, p. 237). It is the moment when reality's 'added values' disappear, and, strictly speaking, we have no objects but, precisely, appearances. Subjectively represented 'objects' are the delimitation of the "great play of forms, the great play of becoming as Heraclitus saw it" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 50).

---

[9] The alterity between 'pure appearance' (a misleading term) and meaning (reality) can be conceived by imagining the moments in which conscience is suspended, and there are no more (or not yet) differences between it and what it is immersed into — and which is entirely immersed in it, as well. These differences emerge as we 'mentalise' that mutual immersion into a more or less refined linguistic signification. However, if we observed ourselves without possessing that signifying framework, we would only witness a sequence of meaningless signs — precisely, of 'pure appearances'. What, within consciousness and language, is a constellation of objects and meanings (that is, reality) is, forgetting these operations, a horizon of superficial forms. Moreover, this oblivion is not a prerogative of mystics or theoretical philosophers but an experience of "the infra-ordinary" (Virilio, 2009, p. 47) we all know well. We can think of how often we immerse ourselves in an activity (driving, for instance) that we lose — even for several minutes — the consciousness of what we are doing. In *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Virilio calls these moments of suspensions, which can be "hundreds every day", "picnolespy" (Virilio, 2009, p. 19), a neologism formed by the Greek for 'frequent' (*pyknós*) and 'surprise' (*epilēpsía*).

[10] Baudrillard does not consider the 'banal' *trompe l'oeil* as much as the one in which the objects are ('picnoleptically') suspended, relieved of their gravity, in a space which is not that of the real and its 'weight'. In the paintings of the late nineteenth century artist William Michael Harnett, for instance, objects are projected towards the observer, removing "a dimension from real space" (Baudrillard, 1990c, p. 28). Abolishing the perspective field of the subject and its depth, this generates the illusion that we are immersed in the objects, but also that the objects are immersed in us. Suggesting this space anterior to the conscious schematisation, Baudrillard writes: "the objects of the *trompe l'oeil* have something of the same fantastic vivacity as the child's discovery of his own image, an unmediated hallucination anterior to the perceptual order" (*Ibid.*, p. 62).

In this sense, Baudrillard's view cannot be considered an "inverted Platonism, a discourse that systematically promotes the negative terms (rhetoric, appearance, ideology) above their positive counterpart" (Norris, 1990, p. 121). Illusion and appearance envelop reality, from whose perspective, illusion and appearance are considered only a negative, *unreal* residue. Illusion indicates the form of everything that appears and disappears, including reality. Reality is a particular form of appearances, whereas the reality principle considers appearances only a semblance that must be turned into a reality — referred back to a cause, reduced to its objective meaning, made visible and codified. Therefore, *the paradigm of reality is founded upon separating what is real and properly existing from what is only a semblance* (or, in Norris's words, what is positive from what is negative). *The paradigm of illusoriness considers everything as fundamentally singular, as a form which is how it is, has its own rules of appearing and disappearing and cannot be turned into a definitive real equivalent. The second is, therefore, a more general framework of the reversibility of the two, as it accounts for both illusion and reality and their metamorphosis.* Many critical accounts of Baudrillard fail to grasp this originality — and literalness — of illusion, continuing to think from the perspective of reality and, inevitably, regarding appearance as semblance: "Material appearance", Zima writes, referring to Baudrillard's theory, "obliterates everything, thereby excluding all questions aiming at a reality beyond appearance" (Zima, 2010, p. 58).

Very differently, Baudrillard thinks that reality obliterates the broader play of forms and appearances (of which it is only a particular case). Hence, the questioning is not excluded; only it invests reality. Indeed, because reality has to disappear for the singularity of the world to reappear, considering Baudrillard's attitude as merely contemplative or passive would be wrong. "Deep down, everything is already there", yes, and "there is "[n]o need to stage a strategy" as things already contain it (Baudrillard, 2012, pp. 60–62). Nonetheless, ignoring this is an implicit choice. It amounts to accepting reality as the only strategy — the strategy of construction, teleological transformation, and the subject's will. It means actively consigning one's thought to its hegemony and ignoring the *strategies* of this other, ineradicable dimension. As Baudrillard writes, "our consciousness of the real is based on our unconsciousness of [the] simulation" that reality ultimately consists of (Baudrillard, 1990c, p. 151). The question is whether one chooses to liquidate what cannot be liquidated (the fundamental dimension of forms) or a reality that presents itself as all that is (and which, instead, can be conceived as a particular form).

Thus, a different approach to the world emerges by considering this "principle of reversibility" of reality into illusion, which "requires that all that has been produced [i.e. transformed into a reality] must be destroyed" and returned to its illusoriness (*Ibid.*, p. 60). Choosing this side is anything but a passive stance, as it demands the "deactivation" of reality and representation, Agamben would say (2016, p. 237). Moreover, because this deactivation is implied by the sovereignty of appearances and illusion, ignoring it means restricting one's 'phenomenology' to an abstraction while still being affected by "the unpredictable fatefulness of the world as it is" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 82).

Analysing *Baudrillard's Raw Phenomenology*, Geniusas claims that this posture "is not easy to possess: it demands an *effort*, it requires a *task*, a passive *direction*, as well as an *intention*" (Geniusas, 2004, p. 298). The subjective element is essential for the integral illusion between consciousness and the world, consisting of one fatally being a part of the other (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 32, 2005b, p. 39). This co-implication is precisely fatal, inevitable: it occurs even without — typically without and despite — the conscious intention of the subject. "Subjectivity […] is not a rival but an accomplice of fatal strategy" (Geniusas, 2004, p. 298), although often despite itself. Baudrillard seems to think that siding with the "rules of the way of the world", which operate nonetheless, serves "almost to protect you against the unpredictable fatefulness of the world as it is" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 82). Using the terminology adopted above, siding with the world is a way to evade the restricted view imposed by the reality principle and invent another position. Thus, the paradoxical posture Baudrillard introduces is never an ascetic one, a renunciation of subjectivity. If subjectivity is implicated in the illusion of the world, considering the whole illusion dispels the unidirectional delusion of subjective sovereignty.

To an extent, one could still glimpse an intention to restore a more elemental vision of things. Nonetheless, this vision derives from acknowledging that things (even as realities) are never passive and play their own game. Illusion (from *ludos*, 'play') opposes the realist inert view of things. Baudrillard considers it a way of 'putting into play', that is, of challenging reality in the name of what things, from an anterior perspective, already are. This perspective shift is a decisive element of Baudrillard's singularity and, as we will see, the ground of a *sui generis* 'political' view directed toward the reality of any form of power. It entails considering not the world in this or that normative possibility (which always ends up establishing a further oppressive reality) but "the world as it is" as the basis of a 'total' radical thinking — aimed at identifying the fatal disappearance of any reality and the eternal recurrence of the "vital illusion" of appearances (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 55). This helps to decipher an affirmation that sounds particularly unusual:

> "It is not the world as it should be which puts an end to the real world,
> but the world as it is" (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 99).

However, how can it do so? How can the world as it is *act*? From a *realistic* point of view, the idea still appears absurd and fatalistic: worst, it might appear to absolve the worst. The expression 'the world as it is' immediately makes us think of resignation if not a justification of the existing. But this is only because we consider the fundamental state of things to be reality. Hence, when we hear 'the world as it is,' we think of something that stands still. Yet, this is only an assumption, a metaphysical hypothesis.

Instead, Baudrillard considers that there is an incessant *play* at the basis of things, a play which is only crystallised by reality and which, therefore, threatens the stability of any reality. By illusion, he means precisely this, "another, more subtle reality [let us take the

term with a pinch of salt] that envelops the first with the sign of its disappearance" (Baudrillard and Guillaume, 2008, p. 147). To clear the ground from misunderstandings, in an interview, Baudrillard explains very precisely what he means by this "more subtle reality", which would be the fundamental illusoriness of the world:

> "This is the key to the whole position: the idea is that of a most fundamental and radical antagonism, of no possibility existing at all of reconciling the 'illusion' of the world with the 'reality' of the world. And I have to say this once again: here the 'illusion' is not simply irreality or non-reality; rather, it is in the literal sense of the word (*il-ludere* in Latin) a *play* upon 'reality' or *mise en jeu* of the real. It is, to say it one more time, the issuing of a challenge to the 'real'—the attempt to put the real, quite simply, on the spot" (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 140).

This *illusoriness* disclosed by the disappearance of all the values added to the world is a challenge to reality. From the point of view of knowledge, *literalness* is the "art of disappearance" by which we restore this play of forms "beyond the subject" and "beyond all meaning" (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 21). This is the cardinal idea of Baudrillard's "wild phenomenology" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 187, translation modified). As anticipated, this idea also allowed this project to find an 'unguarded space' within the literature on Baudrillard and, hopefully, to contribute to it.

Illusoriness is the idea that the world resists its transformation into reality through various forms of uncertainty and duality (such as the one thought contributes to). It is the principle that renders every reality reversible. Baudrillard identifies the originality and supremacy of illusion over reality even in the metaphors of physics, where "the antinomic structure of matter" (i.e. of matter and anti-matter) expresses "the potentiality of the nullification and immaterial return of energy" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 61). "Illusion" is, generally, "the characteristic" of any phenomenon that "retains the possibility of wiping itself out by a violent reversion" (*Ibid.*)[11]. Once more, we can see that Baudrillard not only acknowledges the uncertain status of reality and phenomena, from the linguistic to the physical ones. What distinguishes his theory's radicality is the

---

[11] "Illusion is the characteristic of what retains the possibility of wiping itself out by a violent reversion (matter/anti-matter abreaction) and, therefore, of passing beyond 'material' objectivity (matter and anti-matter are indistinguishable in the absolute; they shine with the same light; they are distinct, linked to each other, only by virtue of the possibility of cancelling each other out. Only energy bound to restricted materiality — to our materiality — is doomed to dissipation and entropy. The original void is amorphous, sterile, homogeneous, symmetrical. It is perfect. No reality can emerge there. It is absolute illusion" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 61).

further passage it does, drawing the conclusion of a destined reversion of reality, which is exterminated like the phonemes in poems or meaning in the *Witz* (see the previous section in the introduction on "*The Absence of Literalness*"). In this, he is more radical than Agamben, who, in his analysis of the physicist Majorana's disappearance "*What is Real?*", seems to propound a probabilistic defence of the real rather than its resolution. "The hypothesis" Agamben explicitly puts forward "is that, if quantum mechanics relies on the convention that reality must be eclipsed by probability, then disappearance is the only way in which the real can peremptorily be affirmed as such and avoid the grasp of calculation" (Agamben, 2018c, pp. 42–43). The proximity to Baudrillard should not deceive: antithetically to him, disappearance becomes the ultimate way of affirming reality.

Instead, Baudrillard considers the rules of illusion as the material resolution of reality. Whereas Agamben sacrifices a more radical hypothesis to save reality in its ultimate non-deterministic form, Baudrillard risks a radical hypothesis. Phenomena's resistance to being measured is "not the consequence of an incomplete knowledge of the data concerning the state of a given system", as Agamben also argues. Nonetheless, it is not only proof of "a deficiency of determinism in reality" (*Ibid.*, p. 22) but the sign that reality 'wants' to disappear and return to the bigger game of illusion (out of which it, after all, emerged). This immanent reversibility, another side of literalness, becomes a generalised form of resistance toward accumulation and appropriation, on which reality is based.

Beyond Metaphysics: A Pataphysical Digression

> "Objective reality corresponded to an horizon for metaphysics. Integral Reality corresponds to the pataphysical sphere. There is no more marvellous embodiment of Integral Reality than Ubu. Ubu is the very symbol of this plethoric reality and, at the same time, the only response to this Integral Reality, the only solution that is truly imaginary in its fierce irony, its grotesque fullness" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 45).

The preference for illusoriness over reality might seem only a 'philosophical' digression for the sole pleasure of Baudrillard, but it is something more. This idea becomes the basis of an almost 'political' or, rather, more than 'political' antagonism: if reality is not fundamental, its 'miseries' are not absolute, either. Any form of power or violence reveals its impotence in accumulating things. We could call this a radical 'metaphysical' position, although metaphysics coincides more rigorously with the triumph of reality in its Western and, currently, worldwide integral version. Baudrillard, too, considered metaphysics always concerned with recuperating a real essence of things, an

authenticity which is the opposite of his playful (i.e. illusory) world[12], where reality is only a secondary *effect* of fundamental illusionism. His conception of the world is undoubtedly an attempt to develop Nietzsche's demolitions of Western metaphysics — in Baudrillard's words, "the author beneath whose broad shadow I moved, though involuntarily" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 2). As some passages demonstrate, there is more than a generic influence:

> "Has a force ever been demonstrated? No, only effects translated into a completely foreign language" (Nietzsche, 1967b, p. 333).

> "Getting used to the idea that the world is an effect without a cause, or in which the effect precedes the cause" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 13)

Metaphysics is concerned with the real causes of things and objective reality, at least if we take its founder Aristotle's version. Baudrillard, with Nietzsche, aims to demonstrate that those 'causes' are only projections, illusions, that serve to create "the alleged depth of the real" (Baudrillard, 1990c, p. 10). The world of effects and appearances aims to respond to a condition that is not metaphysical anymore, with a vision based on "the indistinctness of surface and depth" (*Ibid.*). It is an attempt to take *the world in its literalness*, which is not just an aesthetic choice but a necessary one. Indeed, if integral reality overcomes objective reality, introducing a horizon of total immanence and an irreversible loss of distance[13], metaphysics becomes obsolete, too.

This also renders all theories that still presuppose Western metaphysics obsolete. That is why Baudrillard finds another inspiration in Alfred Jarry's *pataphysics*, defined by his 'inventor' as "the science of that which is superinduced upon metaphysics", concerned with "the laws governing exceptions" (Jarry, 1996, p. 21) or, famously, "*the science of imaginary solutions*" (*Ibid.*, p. 22). Its strategy does not consist in correcting the laws of

---

[12] In conceiving metaphysics, Baudrillard takes the extreme example of Artaud, known for disrupting the conventions of Western theatre and representation with his "theatre of cruelty" (Artaud, 2010). For Baudrillard, this attempt that he otherwise admired betrayed "the glimmer of a metaphysical hope" and "a savage recrimination that's metaphysical in nature" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 8). "There's the dream of a base level, of an atrocity, a ferocity, a savagery we've all dreamed of to some extent", so the urge to eliminate reality translates itself into getting "down to some sort of matter or other" (*Ibid.*, p. 7). As I show immediately afterwards, he preferred Alfred Jarry's *pataphysics* to Artaud's cruelty.

[13] "Videos, interactive screens, multi-media, the Internet, Virtual Reality: interactivity threatens us on all sides. What was once separated is everywhere merged. Distance is everywhere abolished: between the sexes, between opposite poles, between the stage and the auditorium, between the protagonists of the action, between the subject and the object, between the real and its double" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 75).

reality with other ones but showing that they are only some among many other virtual forms of appearance of phenomena. For example, Jarry hypothesises reversing "the law of the fall of a body toward a center", imagining "the law of the ascension of a vacuum toward a periphery". This, he writes, would be based on a "far less arbitrary" choice of "a unit of non-density" (the vacuum) compared to "the choice of a concrete unit of positive density such as *water*" (Jarry, 1996, p. 22).

Beyond its scientific practicability, the example proves that the laws governing reality are only one possible exception based on an arbitrary choice — for instance, privileging density over non-density. As Agamben rightfully points out, what distinguishes "science in the strict sense" from a less restricted theory is presupposing that beings possess "real, describable properties" (Agamben, 1999, p. 67). That also distinguishes a realist vision of the world from a literal one of the world as it is. *De facto*, the pataphysical irony very seriously demonstrates the priority of a broader dimension with rules other than the laws of reality. For these reasons, Baudrillard considered pataphysics as "the only response to [...] integral reality" and "the current state of affairs" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 5), in which reality has become the only totalitarian horizon of things. The pataphysical intention was precisely to consider "the universe supplementary to this one" (Jarry, 1996, p. 21) in the same way as Baudrillard's "world as it is" is "a parallel universe" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 9) which co-exists with reality while challenging and abolishing it.

In his recent "*What is Philosophy?*", Agamben, too, mentions "pataphysics" as "a general science of the nonreal [...] complementary to metaphysics as a general science of the real". He agrees with Baudrillard in considering this "marginal" theory as one of the few where, "at the end of the history of Western philosophy", we can find "the object par excellence of thought" (Agamben, 2018b, pp. 89–90). According to Agamben, that would be an analogous indistinctness of "mental/real, existent/nonexistent, signifier/signified" that we find in Baudrillard's conception of the world. Agamben juxtaposes pataphysics to Alexius Meinong's theory of the pure object — another formula frequently used by Baudrillard to indicate the literal and singular dimension of things [14] — which claims that objects are by nature "*ausserseiend*", 'outsidebeing', indifferent to reality and existence (Meinong, 1960, p. 86). In the same way as Jarry's, Meinong's theory shows that "the totality of what exists, including what has existed and

---

[14] "The inexchangeable is the pure object, whose power forbids either possessing or exchanging it. It is something very precious that we don't quite know how to get rid of. It burns, and isn't negotiable. It can be killed, but it takes revenge. The corpse always plays this role. Beauty, too, and the fetish as well. It has no value, but is priceless. It is an object of no interest, and at the same time absolutely singular, without equivalent, and almost sacred" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 70).

will exist, is infinitely small in comparison with the totality of the Objects of knowledge" (*Ibid.*, p. 79). Only hypotheses of this radicality can respond to a situation where reality has become the ultimate horizon, becoming tautological and absurd in its very triumph:

> "We are, in fact, in pure pataphysics, pataphysics being, on the one hand, the science of imaginary solutions and, on the other, the only known attempt to move to Integral Metaphysics, the metaphysics in which the phenomenal world is treated definitively as an illusion" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 45).

If reality has become everything, only reimagining it — the exact way it is — as an illusion can 'resolve' its totalitarianism. In the same way, only looking at misfortune beyond its moral reality can 'resolve' the 'unhappiness' derived from it.

Reversibility without Consolation: The Radical Optimism of Evil

> "The most fatal of mental errors is to persist in not wanting to consider life as an absolute evil. Many misfortunes, without this folly, we would be spared. But by holding it to be an absolute evil, the evil of life would become relative" (Ceronetti, 2009, p. 31)

> "But why not take the view that the fundamental rule is that of evil, and that any happy event throws itself into question? Is it not true optimism to consider the world a fundamentally negative event, with many happy exceptions? By contrast, does not true pessimism consist in viewing the world as fundamentally good, leaving the slightest accident, to make us despair of that vision? And does not true superstition consist in regarding evil as an exception which ought to disappear? [...] Such is the rule of a radical optimism, we must take evil as the basic rule" (Baudrillard, 1997, pp. 137–138)

Reversibility is the other primary rule Baudrillard derives from his dualistic vision. Thanks to the literal resolution, Baudrillard's ultra-pessimism toward the integral realisation of the world turns into a strange relief, if not a 'happy' vision of things. Indeed, Baudrillard detects an ironical or felicitous side even to what seems nefarious beyond any doubt. However, by 'felicitous', we have to mean something beyond morality and the sentimental view of the good and the bad — and, most of all, beyond the realist analyses of events, where reality is the first and most efficient form of 'theoretical correctness'. 'Felicitous', in this sense, is the reversibility of reality, the evidence that its reductionism can be liquidated *literally*.

Baudrillard's outrageousness, exemplified by his analyses of September 11, consists literally in finding this 'happy' side of the coin of even the deadliest event (finding, we could also say, the happy side of an infelicitous reality). As Latouche discusses in his recent monograph, "*Remember Baudrillard*", the height of the indignation transpired when Baudrillard wrote: "Allergy to any definitive order, to any definitive power, is — *happily* — universal, and the two towers of the World Trade Center were perfect embodiments [...] of that definitive power" (Baudrillard, 2003c, p. 6, my emphasis;

Latouche, 2019, pp. 23–24). Paradoxically, what is outrageous and immoral is Baudrillard's capacity to find something 'happy' beyond the principle of reality — in this case, the moral reality of good and evil. As one accepts neither the reality of evil nor good and opts for their reversibility, one breaks the essential dogma: that of reality itself.

> "Any questioning of reality, of its obviousness and its principle, is deemed unacceptable and condemned as negationist [i.e. the term used for Holocaust deniers]" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 22).

Baudrillard's position has nothing moral to it. His apparent pessimism is a radical "thought" that does not accept either the moral consolation of victimhood or the world's perfectibility. On the contrary, it aims to "reach down to the floor of the abyss" to acquire an *irreducible* view, which is the one we have begun to expose. At that fundamental (at the same time, superficial) level of the play of appearances, we find "neither good nor evil" (*Ibid.*, pp. 143-144), but only their metamorphosis and reversibility — itself the "source of enjoyment", as seen before (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 232). "There can be no intelligence of things so long as this fundamental rule is ignored. The illusion that the two can be distinguished in order to promote one or the other is absurd" (Baudrillard, 1993c, pp. 109–110).

This means that what is uncontestably considered good (for instance, reality) continuously becomes the worst, and vice versa. The height of pessimism, too, coincides with a radical and immoral optimism: *an ultra-pessimism for the misery of the present and an ultra-optimism for recognising its illusoriness*. We could say that Baudrillard's *lucidity* resides in the showing through (transpiring) of optimism through pessimism as the best shows through the worst (and vice versa) in what he calls "the transparence of Evil" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 67).

Therefore, this 'optimism' must not be confused with a subjective posture in that it challenges both strictly speaking pessimism and optimism. Instead, we can consider this one of the many instances of Baudrillard's "good use of imposture", that is "the art never to take a definitive posture", the "ability to metamorphose posture" (Baudrillard, 2000a). Indeed, the two postures are based on the bad of the world as it is as opposed to the good of the world as it should be. But once the world is treated as a metamorphosis and a play of forms — in a word, as an illusion — distinguishing and giving reality to them becomes absurd. Baudrillard's *im-posture* is a direct consequence of this radical phenomenological evidence, which does not require (in fact, forbids) any further foundation:

> "There is no point whatsoever in wondering whether things ought to be thus: they simply are thus, and to fail to acknowledge it is to fall utterly prey to the worst of illusions. None of this invalidates whatever may be possible in the ethical, ecological or economic sphere of our life — but it does totally relativize the impact of such efforts upon the symbolic level,

which is the level of destiny" (Baudrillard, 1993c, p. 105, modified translation).

Baudrillard acknowledges that radical thought inevitably sacrifices the *real value* of such efforts. However, this is inevitable since that supposed value proves to be another illusion. Nonetheless, this has nothing depressing to it. Indeed, Baudrillard's imposture does not merely identify this or that misfortune, but the source of their reality, which can be found at "the symbolic level […] of destiny" (*Ibid.*) — another formula to indicate the 'illusory' play of forms.

Radical thought's antagonism responds to reality's specular radicality as the latter becomes "an unlimited operational project whereby everything becomes real, everything becomes visible and transparent" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 17). Integral reality's underlying promise is to give everything a definitive equivalent, and its moral imperative is the inexorable realisation of this principle. Moreover, since it currently operates virtually to achieve its effect, integral reality already presents itself as (virtually) *everything that is* — definitive and without alternative. It is sufficient to think of the 'virtually' (notice the term's ambiguity) unlimited capacity of digital codification, which we increasingly witness in the development of AI. However, this is already too much: we must glimpse the same tendency in our trust in language's capacity to signify and represent any imaginable thing.

Against this prospect, an equally integral rejection arises: "It is against this world become entirely operational, objective and without alternative that the denial of reality, the disavowal of reality, develops. If the world is to be taken *en bloc*, then it is at that point we reject it *en bloc*" (*Ibid.*, p. 34). From the point of view of reality, Baudrillard's position is effectively morally and politically nihilistic (Norris, 1992, p. 194). This is because it literally confronts the nihilism of reality (its liquidation of the world) in its foundations. Simultaneously, it rediscovers the parallel rules of total reversibility. In a reality where the separation of terms (their identity) is good, this is another form of evil. Instead, in Baudrillard, the dissolution of their identities guarantees that things will continue to become and metamorphose. For Baudrillard, this counter-perspective is not 'good': it is the rules allowing things to be as they are, that is, singular. It is what preserves them as a "form-of-life", that is, "a life inseparable from its form" (Agamben, 2016, p. 246). Citing Agamben, Baudrillard defines what is irreducible to reality and its codification as a "nondescript singularity" Field (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 169). Thus, "that things are 'status quo'", and not that they become, "*is* the catastrophe" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 473). The "vital illusion" (Baudrillard, 2000b), by which we should understand the rules of the world and not a deceptive consolation, is how the world remains singular and continues to become, that is, to live.

Thus, to the prospect of a suffocating Good, Baudrillard prefers a "lucid view" of "Evil", namely "the world as it is and as it has been", which this reality connotes as "misfortune" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 144). Lucid pessimism dispels the moralistic view and its

absurdity of considering that the world "ought never to have been […] in the name of God or a transcendent ideal, of a good it would be very hard to define" (*Ibid.*, p. 144). The radical requirement — getting to the roots of things — directs Baudrillard toward "the intelligence of evil" (*Ibid.*), the intelligence that comes from the world. Baudrillard prefers this view because it is not further reducible: a vitally *irreducible* thought since it includes both the subjective and the objective illusion (the singular life of the world). It does not stop at any unhappy ressentiment given by the imperfection of the world — which, consoling itself with 'what it should be', also reinforces the irreversible process of integral reality.

Defining one's theory as the intelligence of the world might sound arrogant, but Baudrillard's position is precisely the opposite. His radicality lies in recognising that theory belongs to a bigger game, which it can never claim to master. From this, its life also depends:

> "The player must never be bigger than the game itself, nor the theorist bigger than theory, nor theory bigger than the world itself" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 199)

Whereas the intelligence of the good is partial and subjective, the intelligence of evil (which should be more clearly called the intelligence of reversibility of good and evil) considers the whole vital illusion of the world, including theory.

Toward Literalness: World-Thought

> "The real world belongs to the order of generality, the world-as-is to singularity. To repeat: not only is it a world of difference, it is one of absolute, radical difference, more different than difference, at the remotest distance from that sort of fusion /confusion. Toward literalness" (Baudrillard, 2002).

> "Object-thought, thought become inhuman, is the form of thinking which actually comes to terms with impossible exchange. It no longer attempts to interpret the world, nor to exchange it for ideas; it has opted for uncertainty, which becomes its rule. It becomes the thinking of the world thinking us. In so doing, it changes the course of the world. For though there is no possible equivalence between thought and the world, there does occur, beyond any critical point of view, a reciprocal alteration between matter and thought" (Baudrillard, 2001a, pp. 31–32).

Turning toward the integral illusion of the world and away from reality's restricted view, Baudrillard's thought rejects the idea of radicality as a subjective initiative. Recognising that the illusion of the world resolves all the (subjectively) added values, radical thought is instead an "object-thought" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 31), a "world-thought" and an "event-thought" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. 92). Radicality is not a quality possessed by the theorist: the world itself is radical and thought is the element of the world refracting that radicality. The intelligence of the world consists in the world's irreducibility to

reality, that is, in the illusory (i.e. playful) form of things. Radical thought is the world's own protest and antagonism towards reality. It is the resistance that lies in the singularity of things which are incompatible with its general codification.

Baudrillard summarises this intrinsic reversibility of every singularity in the pamphlet *Forget Foucault*, where he attacks even the attempts to accumulate things in the most fluid conceptual reality (Baudrillard, 2007). Although these attempts, as in Foucault's writings since *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977), deconstruct a particular reality in their content, they ultimately reproduce the reality principle. In this case, "Foucault's discourse is a mirror of the powers it describes" since it "flows, it invests and saturates the entire space it opens. The smallest qualifiers find their way into the slightest interstices of meaning" (Baudrillard, 2007, pp. 29–30). In other words, it shares its form with the power it attacks. It does not reverse and liquidate it in its illusoriness but, instead, constructs "a discourse of power" which reverberates the same reality principles as its object (*Ibid.*).

Instead, Baudrillard thinks we should practice the reversibility of forms we find in the world in theory, too. Only in this way can theory confront and liquidate reality:

> "Any attempt at accumulation is ruined in advance by the void.
> Something in us disaccumulates unto death, undoes, destroys,
> liquidates, and disconnects so that we can resist the pressure of the real,
> and live" (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 51)

Radicality derives from also recognising the reversibility of thought's reality. Thinking becomes radical only once it ascertains and assumes the impotence of its constructive attempts, playing on that impotence and escalating it. Explicitly inspired by the fiction of "Ballard" and "Borges", it aims to be something "like an additional fiction, a fiction surpassing fiction" capable of "reinventing the real as the ultimate and most redoubtable fiction," (Baudrillard, 2003c, p. 29). In other words, Baudrillard's radical thought accepts its destiny as an element of the fundamental illusoriness of the world. It does not only respond to the disappearance of the subject and the world as representation (Vattimo, 2019) passively. It also discloses a more radical form of thought, which comes from a literal view of the world's illusoriness.

Its basis is the uncertainty principle of the "physical alteration of the world by consciousness" and the "metaphysical alteration of consciousness by the world" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 32), which hints at a sort of trace left by one on the other. *This trace is not a thing but the signs of a mutual metamorphosis of thought and the world* and, in this sense, *a literal thought*. Human consciousness and its symbolic constructions, including reality, alter and contaminate the universe — 'we think the world' means more than an innocuous reflection. At the same time, because thought is materially part of the world, "the world thinks us" back (*Ibid.*, p. 115). Thought is also "the distillation of the world in homeopathic doses" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 140): a precipitation of

the metamorphoses of matter and, sometimes, its 'felicitous' outcome. This is the form of literalness:

> "Men have written much about the essence of matter; I only wish that matter would for once begin to write about the human mind. It would show that thus far we have not understood one another very well" (Lichtenberg, 2012, p. 179).

> "But isn't it already matter that writes us and thinks us — through the coming-to-pass of the world in its literalness?" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 46)

In this way, recognising itself as part of the literal writing of the world, thought finds a principle different from that of reality. Baudrillard's peculiar style aims to echo and amplify the literal alteration and is only comprehensible by keeping this in mind. If we tried to verify its hypotheses, we would almost always find exaggerations, imprecisions, and deliberate paradoxes. However, that is because thought aims to become, especially after his first, more conventional books, a part of the world which resists its integral realisation (including the conceptual-theoretical one). In this sense, Baudrillard's theory is hyperpolitical: at this point of the system's development, he claims, the only radical 'political' position is the one which attacks the entirety of reality.

Pre-empting a facile objection, it does not count if his theories get close to fables or mental experiments. It is the challenging quality of their hypotheses which counts. Language, he writes, "must remain a fiction, a fable and hence echo the irresolvable fiction of the event" (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 50). Even hypothesising integral reality allows us to hypothesise hyperreactions to it and avoid being fooled by its ideologies (which also includes the idea that hypotheses are measured by their reality). In line with this, Baudrillard claims that "hypotheses, by definition, aren't made to be verified" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 52).

Since things themselves protest against reality, radical thought can only explicitly assume the form of things — which is itself radical. In this way, it ceases to be a series of conceptual formulas detachable from their literal form. Instead, it becomes a *material* refraction of the world (granted that its materiality is the play of forms examined and not an objective materiality, which would be a secondary illusion like reality)[15]. That is why Baudrillard's attention to the style and form of writing, evident since the beginning,

---

[15] This is what Zima seems to suggest: "Material appearance obliterates everything, thereby excluding all questions aiming at a reality beyond appearance" (Zima, 2010, p. 58).

becomes increasingly important and his actual 'hyperpolitical' strategy. Playing on its singular modes of appearing and disappearing — on the literalness of language — Baudrillard reaffirms the elements irreducible to the reality of discourse and the restricted paradigms of signification and conceptuality[16].

Since conceptual contents operate at the level of reality, Baudrillard's writing becomes a material challenge to them. Both with other author's concepts, with those drawn from current events and his own, Baudrillard pushes them to their limits until, once more, he finds "the irreducible point which gives an unimpeded view of the world". He is not afraid to call this "the obsession, the secret motive" of his theoretical "progression" (Baudrillard, 1998a, p. 113). The underlying logic is the same as we have analysed until now.

Experimenting with styles that short-circuit the reality of discourse, particularly the aphorism, Baudrillard believes there can be a "salvation [...] in the form" and, in any case, not in "the content" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 158). Any thought that bursts reality's imperative is aphoristic, in the sense that it constitutes itself as an "uncrossable horizon [...] of singularity" [17] that prevents its realisation into a discourse (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 142). This would mean that Baudrillard remains relevant as long as no definitive reading can dissolve its illusoriness. In the same way, human thought would remain relevant and singular if a total reality fails to integrate it. Indeed, Baudrillard considers "the virtual" as based on "a thought obsessed by its own functioning, absorbing its own limits and its own horizon" (*Ibid.*).

It is crucial to notice that Baudrillard's 'hope' *does not come from the preservation of an uncontaminated quality*: the singularity of thought derives from the reciprocal alteration between it and the world. Instead, integral reality purifies things by reducing their continuous transfusion and metamorphosis with *the other* — the only guarantee of their singular becoming. In Baudrillard's imaginary, the figure of this becoming is a "double spiral" (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 66; see Gane, 1991a, pp. 193–211): the form of thought remains singular insofar as no concept is definitive and unsurpassable. Precisely the opposite, the spiral of concepts is continuously "swerving" and altered by other concepts (*Ibid.*), as if each concept was a form of life rather than a reality. Instead, if a pre-formed codification were all that remained of it, thought would lose any singularity

---

[16] A difference attested by the irreplicable experience of reading an original text compared to 'apprehending' its didactical reduction from a manual.

[17] A plausible etymology Baudrillard imagines around the Greek '*aphorizein*', which conventionally derives from '*apó*' and '*horízō*', 'to separate from', from which the word 'horizon', too.

and be irremediably *reduced to reality*, becoming (in itself and its form) irrelevant. The survival of thought is the survival of illusoriness, and it depends upon the preservation of a literal, inappropriable quality which coincides, paradoxically, with the double alteration of thinking and being thought — echoing a Heraclitean idea of becoming (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 50).

In Case of Disappearance: A Drastic Revision?

> "Machines that are an end in themselves — is that the *umana commedia*?" (Nietzsche, 1986, p. 189)

> "The obsolescence of humans has reached its terminal phase. Their fate is definitively beyond their reach. In the end, human beings will only have been an infantile illness of an integral technological reality that has become such a given that we are no longer aware of it, except in its transcendental dimensions of space and time. This revolution is not economic or political. It is an anthropological and metaphysical one. And it is the final revolution—there is nothing beyond it" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 80).

Baudrillard seems to be an optimist concerning the vital resistance at the heart of human thought:

> "I think a form of vitality remains in every human being, something irreducible that resists, a singularity of a metaphysical order that goes even beyond political commitment […] So we must look to the singular for the antidote to the global. I have to tell you, in fact, that if I weren't convinced that there's something in the human being that fights and resists, I'd quite simply have given up writing, since, in that case, writing would be just tilting at windmills…" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 194)

This optimism appears to derive from his trust in the evidence of the irreducibility of the world to reality. Baudrillard does not only consider consciousness an integral part of the world. He also sees it as an expression of the world's destiny that, at a 'late' time, reflects the whole universe and its vicissitudes. That means this 'privilege' does not derive from a subjective initiative. Subjectivity is an inevitably provisional 'gift' from the world. Indeed, Baudrillard affirms, "that's doubtless not the end-point" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 140).

We get closer to the *dead point* of Baudrillard's thought, where its gambling and hypothetical qualities forcefully come to the fore. Considering the impotence of subjective initiatives, Baudrillard has placed his bets on the object — singularity, irreducibility, illusoriness. However, the singular becoming of things is not envisioned around human beings and could instead contemplate their disappearance, as we will examine at the end of the thesis. What Baudrillard's strategy 'saves' is not necessarily the singularity of the human: radical thought, as all other *forms* of the world, will sometime desert the individual and pass "into things" (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 69).

45

Baudrillard believes it will survive in other forms for two reasons: "duality can neither be eliminated nor liquidated" since it is the world itself (*Ibid.*) and "there are […] a finite number of forms" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 35).

These ideas, Baudrillard admits, are, to an extent, "a *parti pris*" to choose the world and a supposed "paralogic" and "strategy" other than realism. Nevertheless, although this is a wager on the world and "the object side", it is at the same time the hypothesis that duality discloses "the world as it is, […] as a kind of radical self-evidence" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 63). Once again, casting the subjective and realistic logic into doubt is necessary to enter this other set of rules and forms. That is why Baudrillard's theory can advance the hypothesis of survival of the form of radical thought but not envision the specific human destiny, particularly in its reality.

This awareness emerges mainly in the last years when Baudrillard becomes increasingly torn between the hypothesis of the irreducibility of thought and that of an integral disappearance. He hypothesises that the form of radical thought could look even more different than he previously believed, to the point of considering that integral reality might absorb it entirely. During this time, the tone becomes even more 'aphoristic', and the eventuality that theory goes silent lurks as Baudrillard's cancer takes hold of his body. Nonetheless, Baudrillard continues to reframe his previous hypotheses.

In what he calls "rogue events" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 103), he thinks to grasp the prosecution of the revolt of things against integral reality. "Attacks, disasters, accidents and epidemics" are all forms of allergy and antagonism against the prospect of a perfectly hegemonic "global order" (*Ibid.*, p. 102). From Baudrillard's perspective, they are forms of terror that counterbalance the "terror of the Good" (*Ibid.*, p. 99), which he also defines as "the White terror of the world order" (*Ibid*, p. 75) — that is, "a full preventive war against the slightest infectious molecule-but also against the least anomaly, the least exception, the least singularity" (*Ibid.*, p. 99)[18]. From a realistic-moral standpoint, rogue events are interpreted as something which ought not to be — for

---

[18] The term 'white' seems to echo some ideas of "operational whitewash" in *The Transparency of Evil* from 1990: "We are similarly exposed on all sides to the glare of technology, images and information, without any way of refracting their rays; and we are doomed in consequence to a whitewashing of all activity — whitewashed social relations, whitewashed bodies, whitewashed memory in short, to a complete aseptic whiteness. Violence is whitewashed, history is whitewashed, all as part of a vast enterprise of cosmetic surgery at whose completion nothing will be left but a society for which, and individuals for whom, all violence, all negativity, are strictly forbidden" (Baudrillard, 1993c, pp. 44–45).

cultural, geopolitical or techno-scientific reasons. Instead, a literal and immoral [19] analysis shows they are a "revolt" which has become fatally "total" to respond to an equally "total order" (*Ibid.*, pp. 75-76). "The more intense this hegemonic process of forced integration and integral reality is, the more singularities will rise against it", he predicts. However, a further hypothesis is directly implied by his theoretical perspective and can be considered his 'last word'.

Among the forms of 'rogue' singularity raised against global hegemony, terrorism was, for Baudrillard, a particularly crucial one. Equally revelatory was the way the West responded to terrorism. The counterchallenge to "their lives and deaths that the terrorists" lay "on the line" is not sacrificing our lives and deaths. According to the rule of symbolic exchange, that would put the terrorists in a superior position. Nonetheless, some episodes such as the Abu Ghraib scandal or the headscarf issue in France suggested to Baudrillard that a generalised "[counter-]potlatch of indifference" was directed against all "the others", those not conforming to the global order (Baudrillard, 2010a, pp. 22–23):

> "[…] they have to sacrifice themselves on the altar of obscenity, transparency, pornography and global simulation. They have to lose their symbolic defences and, of their own accord, take the path of the free-market order, integral democracy and integrated spectacle" (*Ibid.*)

In this way, the global responded to the revolt of singularities and terrorism as its most extreme form. Baudrillard, initially thinking that "the West is not able to make an equal response, […] for what is there beyond death?", hypothesises that "a more general and even more radical form of reversibility is in play" (*Ibid.*, p. 27). In the terms we used in this chapter, does this mean that integral reality has acquired immunity against death? Was Baudrillard looking at reversibility only from one side?

In effect, *even integral reality is part of the singular becoming of forms and the world's destiny. Even it is, strictly speaking, a singular form without equivalence* (it would have to redouble

---

[19] In many cases, Baudrillard prefers the term 'immoral' to 'amoral', considering that the former conveys a better idea of the challenge he wants to put forward. In an interview, he explains: "once you go beyond the question of morality, of good and evil, you have indeed entered the realm of amorality but you have not for all that exhausted the question. The game can continue, to involve amorality itself. And this is why I prefer the word 'immorality'. There is a play on words in the text—morality, amorality, immorality— which I think is absolutely essential here. The point is that amorality as a concept is not very interesting or challenging. The concept of immorality, on the contrary, is far more dramatic" (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 136). This is a stunning example of how Baudrillard abuses certain concepts, privileging the way they sound or the way they, more intuitively, deviate ideas over their 'theoretical correctness'.

itself). Could what operates against singularity, by purifying the world from it, reaffirm a higher form of singularity? Could Baudrillard have fallen into this trick? As he admits, this would imply "a drastic revision, a casting into the balance of what I have always thought" (*Ibid.*, p. 28).

To an extent, this would dramatically confirm his hypotheses, implying, as he also prefigured, the disappearance of theory:

> "[...] theory is not made to be realized. Its effectuation is also its death"
> (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 85)

These ambivalent signs advance the doubt of a necessary reconsideration while, for the moment, everything has not yet disappeared — perhaps. The last of Baudrillard's questions, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?* (Baudrillard, 2009) allows us to measure the poignancy of this hypothesis. It means *going to the utmost extremity of reality as much as of theory to probe whether, in the end, something irreducible remains*. To ask whether, in the end, the world can, at least potentially, remain liveable. If it is true that Baudrillard has gone to the extremes of reality, the hope or despair we find at the end of his journey is a sound attempt at an answer. However, starting now, we have to consider that the way the world might remain liveable (for human singularity) is anything but obvious.

THE LITERAL METHOD OF THIS STUDY

Premise

> "Why is our thought always so subservient to the domination of a 'meta-speech'? Words, for us, must always say more, and do more. We think of things, on the contrary, as 'simply' things" (Nancy, 1993, p. 168).

> "The 'meta' of metamorphosis isn't that of metaphysics. It's a dimension of transference, of transfusion of one form into the other, without any higher instance than the game itself" (Baudrillard, 1996a, p. 25)

In its literal sense, method (*methodos*) is the way (*hodos*) a form appears. In other words, a reflection on the method must show the internal reason, the logic that guided the development of the work. That is, it is a matter of showing how this study arrived at Baudrillard, the choice of whom was neither aprioristic nor gratuitous. It is then also a question of how I worked with Baudrillard and went through his work — again, the *way* which is an attempt to develop a "dual relation with the object, which wouldn't be a subject–object or dialectical relation" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 63). In this way, 'method' echoes the meta-morphosis in which subject and object alter each other. Inevitably, its *a posteriori* reconsideration contains elements of 'fiction' which, nonetheless, serve to enrich the study.

Searching for A Radical Thought of the Present

The initial interest of this study was finding a radical way of conceiving the present, going to the root without settling for compromises. This involved subjecting authors and

concepts to a stress test and observing how they withstood it — namely, how they succeeded in sustaining the confrontation and challenge with a reality that is itself radical and extreme. Indeed, in light of our previous definition of reality, the current condition can be seen as the culmination of a previous process of becoming and, simultaneously, as an unheard-of situation. This second element is the most difficult to identify for the particular form reality has assumed. It is the singularity that radical theory aims to detect.

The long metamorphosis culminating in our so-called global world can be considered that of reality as it increasingly hegemonically developed in the West and its philosophical, scientific and technological tradition (Severino, 2016; Cacciari, 1993; Nancy, 2002, 1993; Agamben, 2016; Heidegger, 1991a, 1991b). That includes the violence that this process, asserting itself, has perpetrated on the (rest of) the world but, as it is little considered, on itself. As Agamben and others argue, the West opens up to globalisation at the end of its history, sealing its triumph and ruin (Agamben, 2018b, p. 12; Ceronetti, 2009, p. 20; Baudrillard, 1994b, p. 68).

Having said this, to conceive the singular form taken by this development, it was necessary to subject the various theories that have measured themselves against it to the stress test just mentioned. This was also meant to rethink the paradigms of reality and modernity, which cannot remain the same after this radical exercise. As we have seen, there is no radical way of considering an object that does not simultaneously consider its dual relation with theory, that is, their literal confrontation. The singularity of the present could only emerge by considering a refracting object that could make less familiarly understood (and more singular) what appears as already conceptualised (for instance, the present as the end-point of technological progress or other hegemonic myths, including postmodernism).

That the present is too evident and self-referential is a little-considered hypothesis. Nevertheless, Hegel pointed out that "the well-known, just because it is *well-known*, is not *known*" (Hegel, 1977, p. 18). Ceronetti speaks of recent history as "a 33 rpm vinyl record [...] with a broken groove, that endlessly repeats, and you cannot stop it, the same, same notes" (Ceronetti, 2009, p. 74). Baudrillard considers this the result of a "universe of [...] answers" that have "no questions" (Baudrillard, 1996a, p. 20), a situation embodied by predictive technologies and the digital code, indifferent to any content. Today, no critical questioning would 'embarrass' the machine. A challenge to its underlying code, which is not only the digital but the reality principle, is required.

The attempts to deconstruct the present might appear unsatisfying from a radical perspective precisely because they do not question — that is, destroy — the well-known. In them, we find a residual element — reality — that remains unchallenged. To an extent, interesting definitions like "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000), "postmodern condition" (Lyotard, 1984) or "weak thought" (Vattimo and Rovatti, 2013) seem to give up reversing the reality of modernity itself. Instead, all these three paradigmatic

conceptions characterise our condition in a passive way that ironically reconfirms the sovereignty of modern reality — we can feel that they have something in common. Paraphrasing Baudrillard, similar theories of the present do not have the ambition to theoretically "destroy" its reality but only to "deconstruct" its characteristics, leaving it where it is (Baudrillard, 1996a, p. 25): a reality with this or that attribute remains fundamentally what it is. Bauman claims that "What is wrong with the society we live in […] is that it stopped questioning itself" (*Ibid.*, p. 22). However, digital automatic self-questioning seems precisely what defines it, and if the answer precedes the question, it renders the latter irrelevant.

In this perspective, it seemed logical to treat the authors and thoughts examined not as questions but as a series of more or less uncomfortable counter-answers that challenge those 'automatic answers'. The radicality was measured by how far they could go in responding to the parallel radicality of reality. Thus, in preparing the study, a selection of authors who appeared to be the most decisive in the various seasons of modernity and Western thought was considered. The examination comprised determining the 'outer reaches', the most extreme possibilities of their theory. The review was not limited to the most emblazoned names but also tried to discover heterodox or heretical references to the conventional reading of modernity.

From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Philosophical Lineage

This section aims to sketch the working paradigm this study eventually worked on, identifying the thinkers that influenced it and how themes from their thought are arguably found in Baudrillard's work in a more radical form. In this way, it might give an idea of the scope of the questions and the possible deviations and further developments.

When considering who prefigured and contributed to defining the singularity of the contemporary world, Hegel cannot be avoided. Jean-Luc Nancy defines him as "the inaugural thinker of the contemporary world" (Nancy, 2002, p. 3). In particular, the idea that the culmination of a process corresponds to its twilight (Hegel, 1952, p. 13) is an example of a radical and dualistic understanding of reality and an essential notion for Baudrillard (2009, p. 12). The lesser-known Vico, who more than half a century earlier theorised that the total success of civilisation would correspond to a "barbarism of reflection" (Vico, 1948, p. 381), is equally crucial. This dyad of thinkers demolished the easy treatment of the present as decadence. It made the relationship between good and evil more ambiguous, as does the Mandeville dear to Baudrillard (Mandeville, 1970).

Baudrillard does not mention Vico. However, the "*New Science*" seems to prefigure his theory of hyperreality and the reversibility of the best and the worst (Vico, 2002, 1948; Trabant, 2004). The idea that signs lose any "referential value" and are only exchangeable "against each other", namely "simulation" (Baudrillard, 1993b, pp. 6–7),

echoes the abstraction of "civilized [...] language" when terms are only exchanged against each other (Vico, 1948, p. 106). Likewise, what Baudrillard calls the "transparence of Evil", namely "the transpiration of the worst through the best" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 67), repeats Vico's idea of the reversibility of civilisation and barbarism.

Another essential stop along the *methodos*-way was Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism. His proclamation, "What I relate is the history of the next two centuries" (Nietzsche, 1967b, p. 3), can either be dismissed as an expression of his mental illness or, given its continuing influence on later theories, a "retrospective echo of the event" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, pp. 3–8). Close to his breakdown, Nietzsche already saw the breakdown of the Western and subjective will of power. As we will discuss in greater depth, all true worlds and references transcending life's surface of appearances were recognised as secondary illusions (Nietzsche, 2005, p. 171), preparing the terrain for Baudrillard's hypotheses.

The view of a world no longer true or false but "beyond good and evil" (Nietzsche, 1966) and "beyond objective reality" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 46) opened up. This seems to indicate what Baudrillard terms "the world as it is" (1997, p. 99): a world which is, for the same reason, a "*radical illusion*" (Baudrillard, 1994b, p. 122). It is not a simplistically 'post-truth' world where everything is carelessly equal. Indeed, "the concept [of post-truth] has always been with us in both politics and science — and in much deeper ways than those who decry its existence realize" (Fuller, 2018, p. 1). An expression that Baudrillard liked to repeat was that "If we are not to believe that truth remains truth when we lift its veil, then truth has no naked existence" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 25). In sum, since the idea of truth appeared, humans have probably always felt it as something lost and illusory. The break condensed in Nietzsche's work might be seen as the exposition of this experience, which becomes the decisive element of our epoch's spiritual 'atmosphere'.

The famous quotation on facts and interpretations is key to this new uncertain condition: there are no facts but only interpretations of facts. However, *this is also an interpretation*.

> "No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact 'in itself': perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing. 'Everything is subjective,' you say; but even this is interpretation. The 'subject' is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is.— Finally, is it necessary to posit an interpreter behind the interpretation? Even this is invention, hypothesis" (Nietzsche, 1967b, p. 267).

The radical view of the present sees it as founded on the illusory reversibility of facts and interpretations, which cannot be overcome. *Illusoriness is, in fact, the material substance of the world*. Instead, the restricted hegemonical view is based on the absence

of foundations, which guarantees the reduction of everything to a sign without reference or a value without substance. Not casually, Nietzsche's quote is always mentioned until its first half to argue that everything is interpretation — as if this, too, was not a reversible interpretation. This unlimited exchange or "general commutation" of values (Baudrillard, 1993b, pp. 6–7) presages the financial markets and the generalised digital data exchange. At the same time, it raises the question of whether this absolutely immanent reality, easy prey of banality [20], is all that is. Is not integral reality where everything is only interpretation also an interpretation? The "fundamental illusion" and radical "uncertainty of the world" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 3) returns.

The other issue introduced by these authors, especially Nietzsche's master Schopenhauer, was conceiving *otherness* in the context of this no longer dialectical and objective but self-referential world. What is the place of alterity in a world without references outside itself, in which the transcendent is inconceivable and only an exchange of signs within it is possible? If what is not reducible to reality is expelled from it automatically, the possibility of conceiving alterity other than as a variation of reality's self-identity or as a pure abstraction seems precluded.

In systematic philosophers like Kant, the subjective dialectic proved incapable of successfully reabsorbing the negative. Behind the subject it remained a mysterious "X, the matrix of thought" and "it (the thing) which thinks" (Kant, 1934, p. 331). Furthermore, with Hegel, who had made the boldest attempt to conceive an absolute system, the contradiction exploded in proportion to its rigour. The full extent of this tragic failure emerges in a passage from the "*Phenomenology*", which lies outside idealistic systematicity: "The self-knowing Spirit knows not only itself but also the negative of itself, or its limit: to know one's limit is to know how to sacrifice oneself" (Hegel, 1977, p. 492). The presence of a residue signals the insufficiency of monistic systems, including those most radically dialectical.

In light of this resisting "negative", Schopenhauer inaugurates a thought that seeks to illustrate this irreducible portion of the system, but in a 'positive' way[21]. We no longer

---

[20] "Falling prey to the 'world' means being absorbed in being-with-one-another as it is guided by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity. What we called the inauthenticity of Da-sein may now be defined more precisely through the interpretation of falling prey" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 164). "If there was in the past an upward transcendence, there is today a downward one. This is, in a sense, the second Fall of Man Heidegger speaks of: the fall into banality, but this time without any possible redemption" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 25).

[21] Here, 'positive' and 'negative' have nothing moral in their definition. I am adopting the philosophical jargon which indicates as negative something which depends dialectically upon something else and is a

consider a dialectical monistic system of the spirit but a dualistic theory. Alongside the "world as representation", the world seen through the principles of the subject and its dialectic — what Baudrillard considers reality — we have the world as "will" (Schopenhauer, 1966), 'seen' from the side of things. It is an attempt to look at the world from the side of the world, of the object, the *world as-it-is*. Opposed to it is *reality* from the side of the subject, the world as representation. Baudrillard will also distinguish the two paradigms as the "order of seduction" — that is, the world of appearances and their rules — and the "order of production" — that is, the law of reality and its manipulation imposed by the subject (Baudrillard, 1990c, p. 144).

Nietzsche will echo and use this second part of Schopenhauer's theory (the will) to liquidate his first part (representation). The principles and values of subjective sovereignty are recognised as the effects of "a *chemistry* of the moral, religious and aesthetic conceptions and sensations" (Nietzsche, 1986, p. 12). Reality is recognised as the unconscious outcome of the world as-it-is, and its non-subjective but objectal rules[22]. Nietzsche draws the "final consequence" of Schopenhauer and modern Western thought (Nietzsche, 1967b, p. 4), demolishing all systematic and universalist claims. The illusion of subjective reality that the modern has attempted to establish is shattered: it is now recognised as the product of a more "radical illusion of the world" (Baudrillard, 2000b, p. 82).

If the tradition of the subject and its system fragment, the systematicity of thought also becomes aphoristic. "The aphorism comes after the system, […]. The aphorism is fallen tragedy — not reduced, not consoled" (Cacciari, 1993, p. 85): if the world as representation admitted the systematic treatise, a world of singular appearances admits the aphorism. As Cacciari analyses, the form of the "essay" adopted by Simmel is an attempt to restore "duty and value" after the Nietzschean announcement and to re-present the contradictions of the metropolitan life (*Ibid.*, pp. 67-96). However, as we will shortly see, when those contradictions are once more resolved by integral reality, which automatically organises and codifies life, "All ambivalence is removed" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 47) again. With the aphorism, the Nietzschean announcement returns in a more radical form.

---

reflection, a reaction or the residue of a 'positive'. 'Positive' is what is affirmative and defines itself: what literally 'posits' itself or is, in any case, 'posited'.

[22] Objective reality corresponds to the world seen as subjective representation. "Objectal" is a term which appears in Heidegger and Baudrillard and aims to indicate something which belongs to an order which is not that of the subject anymore (Heidegger, 2004, pp. 250–252; Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 52).

The late modern theoretical vicissitudes reveal a co-implication between content and form, where the medium becomes the actual message (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). Citing Benjamin, theory becomes an entirely different "representation" (re-presentation) of things in their own form. It 'presents again' their form: a material correspondence with the world that has nothing to do with the idea of conceptual representation. That is why, Benjamin writes, "the exercise of this form — rather than its anticipation in the system — must be accorded due importance" (Benjamin, 1998, p. 28). This is valid for both the aphorism and the essay, which, in fact, assume two different views of modern destiny: "[t]he Nietzschean aphorism is the word of one who proclaims the death of God; the essay is the word of the Baptist announcing His return" (Cacciari, 1993, p. 85).

In the literalness of his style, Nietzsche is crucial because he claims to show his conclusions as inevitable, as destiny. This does not derive from fatalism but from identifying that the process we have described had passed its critical threshold, its point of irreversibility: "there is nothing to better, nothing to worsen" (Nietzsche, 1954, p. 178). As Cacciari points out, this "tragic vision illuminates a form, a structure, a destiny. A destiny cannot be corrected" (Cacciari, 1993, p. 28). Suddenly, certain possibilities become the form of things themselves. At that point, there is no strategy other than pushing what wants to fall (Nietzsche, 1954, p. 209) and cultivating other potential destinies. Only drawing the conclusion from a destiny, a potentiality — "the great noon" — opens, by "its own time and its own destiny" (Nietzsche, 1954, p. 178). Asserting it as a destiny "is exactly the opposite of understanding" the reality left behind "as an absolute" (Cacciari, 1993, p. 28): it means to refract its metamorphosis in an equally radical thought.

Even Nietzsche betrays a (tragic) urgency to imagine the negative as 'something' in the figure of the will to power (Nietzsche, 1967b). On this aspect, too, Baudrillard is arguably more radical. Having taken note of the irreducible element of reality, he does not accept any substantiation of the residue. Not even the will to power or the "micro-physics of power" (Foucault, 1977, p. 26) are valid, not even "libidinal intensities" (Lyotard, 1993, p. 18) or rhizomatic multiplicities (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 1), because they reproduce the subjective-substantial form, albeit implicitly.

Albeit dynamic and aphoristic, these conceptions subjectify the material illusoriness of things in the reality of one concept. A single concept cannot translate a singular-plural dispersion that admits no identity. References and ideas, Baudrillard argues, "have to be there only in the anagrammatic state", that is, disappeared in the metamorphosis of one word into another (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 6), to avoid taking one of them for the *form-of-thought* itself. Indeed, this "unrepresentable" is not a thing we know too little about — perhaps because we pose the wrong question. Instead, "it consists precisely in a representative void, that is, in the deactivation and inoperativity of every representation" (Agamben, 2016, p. 237) — in the reversibility and metamorphosis which constitutes the illusoriness of thought. This does not mean renouncing every pretension of confronting the world, but that radical thought is a form of the

unrepresentable singularity of the world. In its form, it echoes its inappropriable illusoriness and confronts reality. "Less and less the subject of desire", including that of representing, "closer and closer to the nothingness of the object" (Baudrillard, 1993c, p. 171): this principle guides the aphoristic extermination of the reality of discourse.

From Simmel to Agamben: The Social-Theoretical Lineage

In the wake of Nietzsche, classical social-theoretical authors also reckoned with this spectre and were crucial in arriving at Baudrillard. As the system of reality acquires a rationalised social form, Simmel brilliantly recuperates Kant sociologically. He tries to make the dialectical device work with the sense of reciprocity established between individual and individual and between individuality and social totality (Simmel, 1992, 1971, 2009, 1950, 2016; see also Valagussa, 2015).

However, the duality on which this conflictual harmony is supposed to be based turns out to be highly unbalanced and violent when Simmel analyses the life of the spirit in the metropolis (Simmel, 1971, pp. 324–339). There, he becomes materially aware of the overwhelming power of the apparatus of socialisation and the rationalisation of life. The individual is helpless and forced to make his life more and more abstract and filtered by the intellect to not succumb to the congeries of stimuli to which it is *subjected* —the unbearable subjection to this apparatus is the only form of 'subjectivity', we could paraphrase. The overabundance of meanings prevents any form of experience, condemning the individual to a sort of 'hyperreal inexistence':

> "Modern man makes his way home in the evening wearied by a jumble of events, but however entertaining or tedious, unusual or commonplace, harrowing or pleasurable they are, none of them will have become experience. It is this non-translatability into experience that now makes everyday existence intolerable — as never before — rather than an alleged poor quality of life or its meaninglessness compared with the past (on the contrary, perhaps everyday existence has never been so replete with meaningful events)" (Agamben, 1993, p. 14)

The violence of socialisation is somewhat of a materialisation of the idealistic system, with the residual negative element of the individual destined to disappear. This is fully exposed by Adorno, who denounces that individuals' lives now correspond to the violence done against them by the socialising apparatus. The prevalence of social forces over life is the *ens realissimum* ['most real thing'] for them (Adorno, 1970, p. 152): it now corresponds with the entirety of their reality (Adorno, 1974, p. 17) — life can no longer be lived (*Ibid.*, p. 39). *Society* is the same process and totalitarian operation of integrating and rationalising life. Theory must then fully understand how what was human advanced "into the inhuman" and ask how far this process can go (Adorno, 1970, pp.

147–149). Heidegger's insights into the technical "enframing" of the world (Heidegger, 1977) and Gunther Anders' insights into the resulting "antiquatedness of humanity" (Anders, 1956, 1980) also go in this direction.

> "Am I a man or a machine? This anthropological question no longer has any answer. We are thus in some sense witness to the end of anthropology" (Baudrillard, 1993c, p. 57).

Having arrived at this point, the comparison with Baudrillard's contemporaries, some still alive, opened up. The issue was finding a thought that clashed directly with the outlined anthropological revolution. This might seem to betray a fetishist passion for timeliness and a 'will to *sense*' — as if Nietzsche's thought were less timely than that of a contemporary. The problem must be considered in the different terms of *untimeliness*[23], that is, what form of thought can remain singular in the face of integral reality? Baudrillard's proximity to current events derives from an explicit "anticipation of actuality [literally, 'timeliness']" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 29), which is perfectly untimely. Indeed, if today his reflections on pandemics and wars are so 'timely', they must have been most certainly not so when they were written. This is confirmed by the idea that the realisation of theory marks its death (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 85). Therefore, radical thought appears as an attempt to radicalise what is already inscribed in the underground of events before it crystallises in reality.

Besides Baudrillard, this study considered Giorgio Agamben's works in depth. Agamben, quoted in some crucial passages by Baudrillard, shares many of his themes and theoretical intuitions. His project of deactivating the dichotomous oppositions of Western ontology one by one, re-establishing their ambiguity, partially resembles the reversibility of symbolic exchange in Baudrillard (Agamben, 2017). Agamben is also interested in rediscovering the singular and ambiguous irreducibility that these discrete oppositions shatter and integrate into their apparatus. For example, the Western biopolitical machine splits life into two elements, the public and the private, to define and better govern it (see particularly Agamben, 2016). However, Agamben shows that these two elements are often confused into figures that are neither one nor the other but show the singular irreducibility of life (Agamben, 1998). The singular is neither particular nor general but undecidability between the two. This singular undecidability is present, especially in the latest Agamben of these years, in figures that are both tragic

---

[23] I borrow the expression from *The Untimely Meditations* (Nietzsche, 1997b).

and comic, such as Pulcinella, Pinocchio and the poet Hölderlin (Agamben, 2018a, 2021c, 2023c, 2023a).

Nonetheless, perhaps above all in his tone, something of that tragic feeling towards reality as it is and not reality as such is preserved (and this is also what makes Agamben interesting). Agamben often recognises how reality is organised, not reality itself, as the essential question. In Baudrillard, we find a progressively exclusive strategic view of things (and their own strategies); in Agamben, a much more 'tactical' one transpires, even when the intention is strategic and fundamental. This minimal subjectivist-realist view is evident in the writings on the pandemic, where he consistently lashes out at medicine that, in his view, has become a religion. The problem is that he also engages with the data on contagions and the efficacy of vaccines on its terms, questioning the medico-scientific basis for interventions but doing so in a way which implies that if the numbers stacked up, these interventions would be justified (Agamben, 2021a, 2021d). In doing so, he only invalidates his general point of view, which denounces the reductionism and biopolitical violence of medicine as such. By dealing with data within its paradigm, he only shares its assumptions.

I repeatedly asked myself how Baudrillard's theory would have altered the coronavirus events. I answered that it would not have entered the debate on the validity of this or that reconstruction of this or that measure. Instead, it would have attacked reality as such and its inevitable reductionist effects.

> "The question is not whether one is for or against war, but whether one is for or against *the reality of war*. Analysis must not be sacrificed to the expression of anger. It has to be directed in its entirety against reality, against manifestness — here against the manifest reality of this war" (Baudrillard, 1994b, pp. 63–64).

This contrasts essentially with Agamben's denunciation that "the epidemic" was an "invention" (Agamben, 2021d). Paraphrasing Nietzsche: Agamben's, too, is an invention. Therefore, his theory is not radical enough. In the Baudrillardian spirit, we could probably say it was 'real, all too real' and that *this* was the problem. The "invention of reality" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 32) goes well beyond Agamben, who is much closer to Baudrillard in some of his works. However, the conclusions he drew on the pandemic are revelatory of a residual realism on his part, a realism that is inexorably and immediately liquidated by Baudrillard. That is why I have considered Baudrillard, momentarily and hypothetically, the closest to a radical thought of the present. As François L'Yvonnet points out, "[h]e is one of the rare thinkers to have fully grasped the consequences of the advent of a 'new' world, one that goes beyond the old categories of thought and action" (L'Yvonnet, 2013, p. 60). Moreover, he also 'invented' an entirely other logic for this condition.

Impact with the Object

Once Baudrillard's radicalism was established, the problem arose of how to deal with it. That radicalism consisted of making thought irreducible to reality, including the reality of concepts and general theories. This intention made it difficult and nonsensical to presume to find his work's 'authentic' macro concepts. Attributing his enigmatic and unusual quality to a stylistic quirk would only have gotten us off track without reducing the difficulty of dealing with his thought. Thus, this study began from the awareness that this 'encryption' of thought was a deliberate choice. Effectively, Baudrillard lays claim to it:

> "The absolute rule is to give back more than you were given. Never less, always more. The absolute rule of thought is to give back the world as it was given to us — unintelligible. And, if possible, to render it a little more unintelligible" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 105).

With this premise, simply denouncing Baudrillard's enigmatic qualities — Robert Huges called his writing "a thick prophylactic against understanding" (Gane, 2000, p. 7) — would be absurd. Instead, his work's resistance to explanations is a thick prophylactic against reality in general. Investigating this particular form of 'impermeability' was crucial to grasp its strategic function. As with the other thinkers, the approach with Baudrillard was not initially mediated by secondary or critical literature, which it was nevertheless consulted. I was interested, like he was, in approaching theoretical work without too many filters and seeing where it could lead me.

My readings luckily started with the text *Fatal Strategies* (Baudrillard, 1990b), the first one that seduced my attention (deviating it from a previous trajectory) with its enigmatic title. By informing myself thoroughly and calculating how best to start, I might not have been able to make a better choice. Indeed, that text represents, also according to Baudrillard, the point at which things take an entirely different turn. It is the text where Baudrillard draws the "final consequence" (Nietzsche, 1967b, p. 4) of those historical and theoretical events traced in the previous paragraphs.

Concurrently, it is also the text in which he draws the fatal consequences of his previous works (above all, Baudrillard, 1993b). If, with *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard takes a take-off without references, these other texts can be seen as the taxiway on which things begin to accelerate. The confrontation with the theories he considered most radical for reading the current phase of modernity prepares Baudrillard's forward acceleration. Indeed, *Fatal Strategies* is perhaps not the first text in which Baudrillard's singular form is expressed — *Seduction* (Baudrillard, 1990c) already belongs to this wake. It is, however, the text where the entire ideal core appears that he will carry through to the end, confirming his belief that one can only have "one great thought" (however ramified) in one's lifetime (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 2).

Fatal Strategies reveals the pulsating core of Baudrillard's thought, which becomes increasingly clear as one considers the remaining works. Moving backwards, one becomes aware of its root, particularly in the peculiar view of objects (Baudrillard, 1996c) and the discovery of another logic that governs language (Baudrillard, 1981), societies (Baudrillard, 1993b) and the world (Baudrillard, 1990c). Moving forward, one observes the attempt to radicalise and measure the same hypotheses against the escalation of reality. Having said this, since what interests Baudrillard is primarily a form and a logic, a significant familiarity emerges in one direction and the other. As Mike Gane states:

> "Baudrillard's thought is evidently not random or incoherent, but quite the contrary: it is rigorous with high degrees of conceptual consistency"
> (Gane, 2000, p. 11).

That form makes its way through the earlier, more conventional material to being radicalised until its limit in the later ones. These two aspects resonate with the idea that things begin long before they appear in their manifestness, and once they appear, they begin to disappear, provoking "extreme phenomena" (Baudrillard, 1993c). In any case, the awareness of this continuity made it legitimate to read Baudrillard as the singular form he claims to be the luckiest destiny of a thinker. Thus, the thesis avoids simplistic subdivisions that renounce identifying the *literal form* running through the different faces of Baudrillard.

The radicality condensed in *Fatal Strategies* resides in not establishing themes and methods to address by subjective initiative. Instead, Baudrillard noted that things had managed to evade the sense we wanted to give them (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 25): it was the realisation of the definitive demise of the privilege of the subject. This recognition implied that the only possible route, however paradoxical if not prohibitive, was that of the object and its 'strategies'. That meant something other than trivially switching from the study of humans to the study of objects, which had nevertheless been Baudrillard's first interest (Baudrillard, 1996c). This division is internal to the subjective order, which distinguishes these two realities. Instead, Baudrillard was interested (to an extent, even in that first study) in the *objectal* form that all things take once subjective principles are deactivated.

The *Fatal Strategies* object, rather than a subjective reason, diverted ('seduced', Baudrillard would say) the metamorphosis of this study. This means that all the explanations of this chapter arise a posteriori: the immanent passage from thing to thing only gives the illusion of a subjective 'review'. An early idea of this literal connection is examined in *Fatal Strategies*, building on a thesis of Nobel laureate Jacques Monod (Monod, 1971). Baudrillard argues that reason must presuppose that things do not meet by themselves or have an order of their own. According to this perspective, the exception is that they meet: at that point, reason can construct causes and effects according to its principles.

"The work of reason is not at all to invent connections, relations, meaning. There's too much of that already. On the contrary, reason seeks to manufacture the neutered, to create the indifferent, to demagnetize inseparable constellations and configurations, to make them erratic elements sworn finally to finding their cause or to wandering at random. Reason seeks to break the incessant cycle of appearances. Chance — the possibility of indeterminate elements, their respective indifference, and, in a word, their freedom — results from this dismantling" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 187).

It is thanks to this constructed neutrality that the subject believes in its power to transform the world: if something ordered and significant happens, it thinks, this is the result of my intervention (by action or, at least, by the knowledge that has given an order to the world). Left by themselves, things would have no sense and be blind to it, lost in the infinite. They would need a subject: an individual, an institution or a physical force behind it to give form to them. *This disputes the consideration of Baudrillard and his influences as irrational thinkers and, instead, reveals the irrationality of Western 'reason'.* Indeed, the work of 'reason' is originally the destruction of the reason that the world and his appearances already express.

In the wake of Nietzsche, Baudrillard cultivates the other order parallel to the real, of the "objectal vehemence of things without [subjective] qualities" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 87). Liquidated the added values, the deeper reason governing their concatenation is immediate and (knowledge-wise) literal. The principles of these connections must remain unverifiable realistically and, yet, have a more fundamental self-evidence. This evidence was the object of the previous chapter, namely, the illusoriness-reversibility of any reality, which implies the superiority of illusion.

Literalness is the key to this evidence, establishing that the same principles apply to ideas and phenomena (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 126), thus dismantling the representational pretences of reason. Through this complicity and antagonism between theory and its object, "The illusion of our history" and reality "opens on to *the greatly more radical illusion of the world*" (Baudrillard, 1994b, p. 122). In the case of this study, *Fatal Strategies*' deviation altered the previous references and their genealogy, disclosing the radical game of Baudrillard's theory.

Bibliographic Method

The material sources of this thesis have been primarily books. I read Baudrillard's *oeuvre* in English in full. I read some of the volumes in the Italian translation, the style of which appears closer to the French. Finally, I consulted and read some passages from the originals to check various terms and expressions. The complete works comprise almost

sixty volumes, including monographs, collections of aphorisms, interviews, dialogues and photographic books.

I focused on Baudrillard's often hidden references and partially tried reconstructing his 'theoretical library'. The books I have consulted range across the different disciplines that interested Baudrillard:

- aphoristic writers (Lichtenberg, La Rochefoucauld, Rivarol, Chamfort, Schnitzler, Valery, Lec, Canetti, Ceronetti)
- anthropology and human sciences (Mauss, Caillois, Segalen, Levi-Strauss, Elkins)
- natural sciences (Monod, Prigogine)
- linguistics and semiotics (Saussure, Benveniste, Starobinski, Barthes, Eco)
- prose literature (Baudelaire, Musil, Borges, Nabokov, Ballard, DeLillo, Bernhard)
- poetry (Hölderlin, Rimbaud, Rilke)
- satirical essays (Zinov'ev, Muray)
- art (Hopper, Duchamp, Warhol)

Apart from these 'eclectic' references, there are numerous theoretical volumes in philosophy and sociology. Most notably, I read or reread many of Nietzsche's works and a substantial part of Agamben's and Ceronetti's. Besides those two, I revised other philosophers (Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Wittgenstein), and I read some crucial works by Mandeville, Sade, Schopenhauer, Marx, Jarry, Bataille, Simmel, Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer, Debord, Cioran, Anders, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida.

I added a few other authors to this list. They either resonated or contrasted with Baudrillard on the same theoretical terrain, allowing me to highlight further crucial issues. I can mention Kraus, Jünger and the Italian contemporaries Colli and Cacciari, among others.

Finally, I examined part of the secondary literature on Baudrillard in English, French and Italian. I focused on their relevance to my main research question to select them.

To complete my contextualisation of Baudrillard's thought, I also listened to some of Baudrillard's favourite music, most notably Monteverdi and the Baroque among the classical and the Velvet Underground's 'banana album' within pop music. A performance by Baudrillard himself in Las Vegas backed by a band and reciting the monologue "*Motel Suicide*" was also a curious discovery on *YouTube*.

BAUDRILLARD AS IT IS:
THE OTHER BY THE OTHER

Introduction: Taking Baudrillard as It Is

This fourth chapter examines the way to approach Baudrillard: how to consider his thought, which elements to privilege and which ordering principles to follow. To do this, the chapter attempts to respect Baudrillard's idea that it is words that carry ideas, and it is the singular form of a language that conveys its message. On the contrary, starting from a given conceptual schematisation dramatically reduces the potential of language and thought, limiting it in advance.

Thus, the best way to begin is to turn directly to words. Baudrillard called them passwords, believing that, once they appeared, they had the power to lead us along theoretical paths we could not have conceived otherwise. If left 'in its wild state', unconstrained in its form, language is an operator of thought. It is in no way reducible to a tool in our hands. It is instead a phenomenon that is part of the world, a phenomenon that is not only logical but physical and material. In this sense, it participates in the destiny of things. Baudrillard is not afraid to say that language thinks us and that the world thinks us through it.

If we apply this idea to Baudrillard himself, the simplest yet original thing to do is start with his name. The singularity of a thought, which first appeared to us with that very name, is already embodied in it. Baudrillard becomes the first password and path we venture out without mediation and presuppositions. The same attitude seems to animate Baudrillard in treating other authors, whom he considers as if they were alive. The second section deals with precisely this by introducing an unknown Italian alter ego of Baudrillard's. It compares Giorgio Colli's attitude towards Nietzsche with

Baudrillard's. For both, authors must be treated without regard in a stringent confrontation with their thought's core question.

Moreover, in the case of Nietzsche, the question is, similarly to Baudrillard, an equally radical confrontation with the present. Nietzsche becomes an incandescent object in which the question of the present crystallises. The reader's task is not to extinguish this incandescence but to fuel it. Our task is not to reduce Baudrillard's radical thought to a conceptual reality but to try to radicalise it further.

Consequently, the following paragraphs illustrate the ambiguity between authenticity and transformation, remembering and forgetting, discovering and inventing. In this ambiguity lies, in plain sight, the secret of singularity. If thought is a living form, one cannot kill it by realising it in concepts — a deadly form of disappearance. One can only try to assimilate its singular form and observe where it takes us as we attempt to take it further. The singularity of a thought, and Baudrillard's in particular, can only consist in this becoming. After all, that passively happens all the same. What readers can then actively do with Baudrillard is to make ourselves agents of a felicitous disappearance.

On the Fatal Tracks of Words: The Route Baudrillard

"Roads leading nowhere
between two meadows,
as if detoured from their end by design,

roads that often have
nothing ahead to face
but the season
and pure space" (Rilke, 1979, p. 121)

"There is in the temporality of words an almost poetic play of death and rebirth: successive metaphorizations means that an idea becomes more — and something other — than itself: a 'form of thought'. For language thinks, thinks us and thinks us at least as much as we think through it" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. ix)

"I love the pace of words, their paths, their stops, their stations" (Canetti, 1989, p. 43)

Baudrillard believed in an immediate, "quasi-initiatory way of getting inside things" thanks to words. At the centre of this conception was the conviction that "words are bearers and generators of ideas — perhaps even more than the reverse". Words are always "passwords", "passers" (i.e. smugglers) and not merely 'passive' tools: "they have a life of their own" and do not just "transmit" ideas (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. ix). On the contrary, they preserve the intrinsic uncertainty and the metamorphic potential of thought, taking ideas (and us) "along unforeseen channels not calculated in advance" (*Ibid.*, p. x). These passages do not happen through the abstract "signification", which crystallises their movement in meaning and sense — namely, in something other than themselves. Nor do they occur through a rigid dialectic between the materiality of

language (sound, rhythm) and its signifying content. Instead, the passages occur unmediated, from word to word, at the level of language's irreducible "hard core of literalness". The singular and irreducible appearance of language is this very unfolding movement.

Although acknowledging the inevitable depth of signification, Baudrillard experiments with the superficial play of terms, their "form and sequencing" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, pp. 57–58). His primary interest is in the singular ways they metamorphose into one another. As a result, in Baudrillard's work, words operate (in a non-technical way) as passers and seducers, which take us off the beaten track, off more or less worn concepts, meanings and realities. Indeed, a material affinity can connect two terms which do not necessarily have an apparent relationship of signification.

The Baudrillardian *passwords* do indeed remind of the Heideggerian *holzwege* ['wood tracks']: "paths, mostly overgrown, that come to an abrupt stop where the wood is untrodden", each of which "goes its separate way, though within the same forest" (Heidegger, 2002, p. v). Similarly to passwords, they only appear identical to one another and, hence, indifferent to where they take. It is impossible to predict their outcome in advance or use them instrumentally without provisionally being deviated by them. For this reason, they are excellent at bypassing the subjective criteria of calculation. In the more literal case of passwords, this is what happens materially whenever, in writing, we move from word to word. "Words as outposts", writes Canetti (1989, n. 51). Paths which, as Rilke writes before Heidegger, do not lead 'somewhere', that is, to some conceptual, definitive result: using a poetic image, they disclose "the season and pure space" (Rilke, 1979, p. 121). It is the season and space of a *form of thought* that is impossible to enclose within the limits of signification and conceptuality — within the perimeter of reality. Baudrillard describes a similar image interpreting the Greek word *aphorizein* (which, as we will see, inspires him particularly). In 'aphorising', he sees a comprehensive theoretical approach not limited to the style of writing in fragments. That consists in thinking and writing in a way that materially maintains a distance from any ultimate signification and conceptual realisation (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 31) — a form of irreducibility to any other equivalent, we could say, that protects the singularity of Baudrillard's thought.

The first *holzweg* we already are on forms the password 'Baudrillard'. B-a-u-d-r-i-l-l-a-r-d: perhaps it all starts from the singularity of this word, which the author ironically considered "the contraction of Baudelaire (Baud) – Rimbaud (ri) – Arthaud (ard)" (Latouche, 2019, p. 268n) and the companion of a series of other 'Bs', "Benjamin, Barthes, Bataille and perhaps also Borges" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 69). A joke? A superstition, as he calls it, too? Perhaps, but also a literal approach to words. It is a practical way to follow the singular form by which they appear, where 'singular' means imposing its twists, almost taking the initiative beyond that of the writer-subject. We always think we produce the object, Baudrillard observes, but the object se-duces (i.e.

'deviate', 'led astray')[24] us towards other routes — those Baudrillard would define as *fatal*. "*Fatal strategies*" is precisely the idea of this initiative originating from the object.

We are not, then, on Baudrillard's route but on a particular course made by many singularities that this project attempts to find out as, to an extent, invents it (the Latin etymology *'invenire'* means both 'to discover', as in the verb 'to invent', and 'come upon', 'find out', as in 'inventory')[25]. A *route Baudrillard* can only consist of this inseparable duality. In other words, reinventing Baudrillard means discovering the singular possibilities of his theories (and those of thought in general, beyond its partly 'fictional' authors) and never limiting them. To guard his work's "singularity" and "freedom" means to encourage "all the possible and all the reversals" that its characteristics engender, "opening the path to an adventure in thought" (Guillaume, 2019, p. 7).

Keeping all of this in mind, instead of utilising the single passages to reconstruct a supposed overall authentic sense (which Baudrillard considered impossible), I preferred to move from word to word, from track to track. In this way, I intended to emphasise the dispersion of ideas more than, although without excluding, their discursive concentration in conceptual identities. Many studies on Baudrillard have attempted to schematise this singularity in overarching concepts. However, those who directly adopted Baudrillard's method identify different passwords instead of conceptual hierarchies (especially L'Yvonnet, 2013; Guillaume, 2019; Latouche, 2019). These authors seem to refract his thought's potential better. In effect, Baudrillard affirmed that we should "prefer the singular to the plural" and "extend to all objects the fateful dispersion of languages" (Baudrillard, 1996b, n. 91)[26] — an apparent echo to Foucault's idea "to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion" (Foucault, 1971, p. 81). In light of its peculiarity, the necessity of this singular dispersion applies first of all to the object Baudrillard.

---

[24] "[…]*se-ducere*: to take aside, to divert from one's path" (Baudrillard, 1990c, p. 22)

[25] I reject the idea of etymologies as revealing a more authentic meaning of words. Nevertheless, they are a tool to reimagine words: once more, finding new potentialities by reinventing them. There is a long tradition in this use of etymologies dating back to Plato's *Cratylus* (Plato, 1997, pp. 101–156).

[26] Baudrillard argues that languages are singular, that is, "incomparable, irreducible one to another", rather than "merely different" and simply "plural". In this sense, their singularity is a form of absolute otherness irreducible to a mere variation within the concept of an "universal language". Yet, according to Baudrillard, this last hypothesis is what sustains the logic of the virtual — of language reduced to communication and information. He defines the "fiction of information" as "a universal form of transcription which cancels out the original text" (Baudrillard, 1996b, pp. 90–91).

'Nietzsche', or to Treat the Absent as Present

> "'Nietzsche'—the name of the thinker stands as the title for *the matter* of his thinking. The matter, the point in question, is in itself a confrontation" (Heidegger, 1991a, p. xxxix)".

> "There are two animal species of intellectual: those who like fresh meat and those who prefer dead flesh. Those who prefer to tear live concepts to pieces and those who would rather enjoy the leftovers. They have nothing in common, except that they are both mammals" (Baudrillard, 1996a, p. 71).

Although they have never been imagined or studied together[27], Jean Baudrillard and Giorgio Colli were two contemporaries with a core thing in common. The name of Giorgio Colli, whose work appears in the main European languages apart from English, coincides with the first edition of Nietzsche's complete works in the 1960s. Baudrillard likely came across that edition, although, as he reports, he indeed read Nietzsche—"all of it"—before (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 208). Not simply for this reason, Nietzsche is the *pass-word* which takes us, without further ado, *in medias res*.

The German philosopher's influence on their works is not a mystery. Colli's relationship with Nietzsche is anything but limited to the editorial effort. Both in his posthumous notebooks *La ragione errabonda* [The Rambling Reason] (1982) and, mainly, in *Dopo Nietzsche* [After Nietzsche] (1977), Colli undertakes a confrontation with Nietzsche which can be defined as careless, without regard. The interrogations Nietzsche posed are asked again, thought anew, radicalised, and directed to the present. For Colli, what is in question is not a dispute concerning the history of ideas but, more decisively, a confrontation with the present, particularly with the destiny of Western culture. The intentions are similar to Heidegger's, who, in the homonymous work, considered "'Nietzsche'—the name of the thinker" as "the title for *the matter* of his thinking". He added that the "matter, the point in question, is in itself a confrontation" (Heidegger, 1991a, p. xxxix). Nietzsche, who spoke to the present "with true hardness" (Colli, 1977, p. 17) is an object which illuminates the latest phase of Europe's history, what Heidegger defined as "European nihilism" (Heidegger, 1986). "If in Nietzsche's thinking the prior tradition of Western thought is gathered and completed in a decisive respect, then the confrontation with Nietzsche becomes one with all Western thought hitherto"

---

[27] A brief, suggestive juxtaposition can be found in Mario Perniola's article after the death of Baudrillard, in which he talks of a deceitful parallel between the French thinker and "that strand of [contemporary] philosophical culture characterised by the vitalist catastrophism, which in Italy goes from Pirandello to Giorgio Colli and Giorgio Agamben" (Perniola, 2007).

(Heidegger, 1991a, p. 4). The "unnameable present", in which characteristic confusion seems to reign (Calasso, 2020, n. 3), could be seen as needing these clarities, these crystallising capacities of an object like Nietzsche. Nietzsche refracts the present, and we get closer to the matter of Nietzsche's thinking through the present's retroactive impact.

Precisely this, Colli suggests in the notes for "the 'Nietzsche'", can be obtained from the study of the great thinkers: "to overcome the vulgar shock of the present, and try to draw some permanent values from this human world" (Colli, 1982, p. 115). The confrontation with the thinker becomes the *untimely* confrontation with "the thing of his thought": a confrontation with the core of reality and its pressing questions, which elude the 'timely' chronicles and only crystallise in rare objects. Untimeliness means "acting counter to our time and thereby on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come" (Nietzsche, 1997b, p. 60). The friction with reality must be emphasised: no reflecting compliance is admitted. The shock is internalised and poetically re-presented.

For the same reason, the thinker must be taken to the extreme, "keeping the pedestal of greatness high" (*Ibid.*). Only this allows us to draw the "final consequence", as Nietzsche would say (1967b, p. 4), of the thought and, hence, the thing in question. "To venerate a piece of writing" does not mean to treat it with softness, as this would contradict the illustrated spirit: a confrontation does not admit softness, and Colli demonstrates it in his strict examination of Nietzsche's questions. Nietzsche's "true hardness" must be fully adopted as Nietzsche himself is engaged.

Baudrillard's position is comparable, but it adds further suggestions. In an interview from 1991, he recalls his studies "in German philosophy, the history of philosophy and the history of ideas as a young man". In this, the figure of Nietzsche is one of the most (if not the most) crucial: "that philosophical education", he continues, "above all influenced by my study of Nietzsche, remains a philosophical drive in my work". Baudrillard then cites many well-known influences, eventually adding: "If I have a master, it is Nietzsche" (Baudrillard, 2015, pp. 47–48). Here, as well, Nietzsche is not a mere literary or conceptual reference, a relationship toward thought that Baudrillard always rejected (e.g. 2003b, pp. 97–98). In his words, the one with Nietzsche is "at most a connection of referencelessness" and "not a reference in the sense of the history of ideas" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 106). Elsewhere, Baudrillard will also repeat that his intention is not "manipulating ideas from the history of philosophy" but to free himself "from a referential, teleological thinking" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. 98).

What does this mean about Nietzsche? Specifying the idea, Baudrillard tells elsewhere that Nietzsche "is the one who has continued to be the most important, but not as a point of reference, as someone I would cite, but as a spirit (*esprit*), as a stimulus (*impulsion*), or inspiration" (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 203). The text is an interview, and Baudrillard does not specify what that spirit is. However, the idea is clear. Nietzsche's spirit (his form of

thought), still alive or treated as such, has continued to infuse Baudrillard's thinking long after Baudrillard stopped reading him (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 208). A lively forgetfulness in which the disappearing object irradiates, leaving its trace on the one who thinks it.

This helps us to understand Baudrillard's peculiar relationship towards referentiality, summarised by his sarcastic confession of "having sinned by omission of references" (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 38). It is not a matter of rejecting past thought but *thought as past*—as dead matter, resolved and catalogued in a history of ideas. References without spirit are only a way of not thinking. In contrast, forgetting them as historical material lets them enter into a second life and "pass into an enigmatic state which is neither life nor death" but, as Baudrillard defines it, that of "disappearance" (*Ibid.*, p. 24). After all, is not a literature review an attempt to say how things were thought 'until now'[28], to crystallise them and, therefore, a declaration of what we can avoid confronting in living form? On the contrary, disappearance is "*a sort of state of grace*" in which the origins and end of something have been successfully obliterated, the thing shines out, and "remains resplendent" (*Ibid.*, pp. 91-92).

Therefore, Colli and Baudrillard can affirm:

> "Nietzsche attacks Socrates as if he was alive, as if he saw him in front of himself. This is the great fascination of his untimeliness. To be outside of time, but to draw the past closer, to treat the absent as present" (Colli, 1977, p. 32).

> "The problem for me has always been that I see my interlocutor from the perspective of what is current (I don't mean in the journalistic sense), according to the situation. I am always a bit of a situationist and for me Nietzsche is someone who is completely topical. [...] I don't even refer to him. He exists and that's that" (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 203).

The same can be attributed to them, and the same is the intention of this project. Will we be able to speak to and with Baudrillard "as if he was alive"? To assume that "he exists and that's that"?

---

[28] A classical title we often see on enigmatic academic books: "Sociology now", "Theory now", etc.

The Formation of the 'Pensée-Baudrillard'

What brings us to this *holzweg*, to Baudrillard? A punctual reconstruction should contemplate so many variables and coincidences that retracing them is impossible. However, we have anticipated that the object Baudrillard's radical form constitutes its singularity. An exclusive concentration on the content would produce the illusion that Baudrillard's work is reducible to its conceptual and discursive message. It would render it virtually exchangeable for other thinkers who could have thought in the same direction and reached similar conclusions.

In effect, if we go and investigate thoroughly as some have done (e.g. Gane, 1991a; Latouche, 2019), we realise that the unusual concepts he uses are not arbitrary inventions. His ability to conceal the traces[29] renders it more challenging to identify their underlying references, which Baudrillard radicalised or applied to the letter to the point of wresting them from their initial meaning. If we are interested in Baudrillard, it is first of all because of the way the contents take shape in his work — namely, the way things are formed, the *formation* of this thought. Unlike the isolated theoretical objects we find 'mulled over' even in textbooks, its mode of taking shape is impossible to replace. The inevitable absence of his style from didactic approaches cannot equal the enjoyment, even when the explanation is impeccable.

Inside the German painter Paul Klee's *Notebooks*, we find a splendid definition of this dynamic conception of form (*formation*) that perfectly applies to Baudrillard and helps us to understand what we mean by the *singular becoming* of thought:

> "The relation between formation and form, which we discern even in the smallest things, retains its fundamental character in later stages, because it is determined by a principle. I think that the nature of this relation can be stated in one sentence: the way to form, dictated no doubt by some inward or outward necessity, is higher than its own end and goal. The way is essential and determines the conclusive or concluded character of the work. Formation determines form and is therefore the greater of the two. Thus form may never be regarded as solution, result, end, but should be regarded as genesis, growth, essence. Form as phenomenon is a dangerous chimera. Form as movement, as action is a good thing, active form is good. Form as rest,

---

[29] "What more can I say? To go deeply into this you'd have to make the effort to retrace your own footprints. But since I've done all I can to obliterate them, it becomes difficult even for me to exhume them" (Baudrillard, 2004a, n. 10).

as end, is bad. Passive, finished form is bad. Formation is good. Form is bad; form is the end, death. Formation is movement, act. Formation is life" (Klee, 1961, n. 169).

The formation of theoretical objects always occurs in stylistically, literarily, and aesthetically irreplaceable ways. Anybody would agree that no manual can become the ultimate equivalent of a theory. Nonetheless, the absolute inequivalence of theory is more controversial. Baudrillard would explain it by saying that we admit as real only what has an equivalent (Baudrillard, 1983b, p. 146). Nevertheless, as he points out, written works "form and transform in the language itself, and we must not exhaust them by interpretation, which short-circuits their power" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 30). The question is how the work can be transcribed, re-invented and commented without being substituted.

To avoid it in advance, Baudrillard pushes many logical and writing conventions beyond their limits. This feature renders the initial approach to his work disorienting, but this is not an unwanted side effect. In the condition of Integral Reality, which is supported by a potent "metaphysics of the code" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 57), by an all-embracing codification and formatting of everything[30], pursuing an enigmatic form becomes a deliberate and almost 'political' challenge. The impossibility of being substituted and exchanged for an equivalent is, in fact, the definition of singular (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 171). Strictly speaking, this feature belongs to any appearance, given that the world itself is singular and unexchangeable (*Ibid.*, p. 3). However, Baudrillard is not only content with a passive singularity. On the contrary, he pursues an actively challenging form of thought whose aim is to avoid automatic categorisations within reality.

Baudrillard searched for the modalities in which this irreducibility can be articulated throughout his theoretical journey. In its content, too, the terms 'illusoriness', 'world as-it-is', 'evil', 'forms', 'appearances', 'fatal strategies', and 'singularity' all revolve around this idea of irreducibility. The irreducible remains the only antidote to the virtually totalitarian project of Integral Reality[31]. Indeed, this "XXX phase of reality that we have

---

[30] The most banal form is the fixed format social media posts, whereas the most serious one is the binary code or DNA.

[31] The semiologist Paolo Fabbri, among those who knew Baudrillard better, named a conference on him "*The Irreducible*" (Fabbri, 2018).

arrived at" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 45)[32] is not only founded on the presumption that everything can find an equivalent and can be technically codified. Under the hegemonic digital apparatus, this codification happens automatically and with sophisticated predictive capacities.

Curiously, codification even touches on the idea of irreplaceability and singularity. In fact, what is the invention of the NFT if not an attempt to codify this form? Non-fungibility is a typically abstruse term that indicates non-translatability into something else, into an equivalent. It is the paradoxical attempt to certify the impossibility of an equivalent through an equivalent code, i.e. to find an equivalent for the absence of an equivalent—a true masterpiece illusion. This example, which also shows the ambiguously comical and disturbing character of the virtual, confirms the timeliness of Baudrillard's theme. Beyond this example, we can ask whether these developments resize Baudrillard's singularity or revamp his irreducibility.

The serious question is whether his *form-of-thought,* taken as a whole, preserves the possibility of antagonism toward Integral Reality. Thus, studying Baudrillard lies in setting this possible antagonism in motion to detect how reality reacts to it and, conversely, how its form of thought has evolved. After all, this was the task of Baudrillard's thinking: to create a radical parallelism that both analysed reality and challenged it (Baudrillard, 2003b, n. 98). As previously mentioned, the idea echoes Heidegger's treatment of *Nietzsche*: when we turn to a thinker, we turn to the question at stake in the work (Heidegger, 1991a, p. xxxix). The thinker's singular form is expressed in the challenge posed to reality by thought and the counterchallenge of the real, to which thought again responds, raising the stakes. Even with Nietzsche, the matter was a "confrontation" — in that case, with the history of the West (*Ibid.*).

Let us then take a cue from those, often friends, who have emphasised the need to fuel Baudrillard's singularity rather than dissecting it.

> "The concern, consequently, [is] not to try to *translate* by returning to the familiar, to accommodate, to lenify, as has too often been done. On the contrary, to seek to bring out the singularity, to probe the radical differences" (Guillaume, 2019, pp. 12–13).

Studying Baudrillard cannot mean preserving its secret authenticity. On the contrary, it means bringing his form to life beyond how he could develop it: "staying *by* Jean

---

[32] By "XXX phase" Baudrillard clearly means something like 'nth' and not '30th' as the Roman number would imply. The expression may ironically remind of the various versions of an operating system.

Baudrillard by continuing to read current events starting from the language he proposes" (*Ibid*.). In his words, it means continuing "to measure the angle of incidence" established between an irreducible thought and an enigmatic phenomenology of the present (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. 98). This angle dissolves as soon as we stop feeding the mortal challenge between Baudrillard and the real, as soon as we put Baudrillard in any conceptual, disciplinary drawer. It also dissolves when we endeavour to verify his theories, which he considers deliberately hypothetical:

> "We're in the area of hypotheses — the hypothesis of reality, the hypothesis of truth, the hypothesis, even, of illusion — these are all merely hypotheses. And, hypotheses, by definition, aren't made to be verified. [...] Hypotheses are made to be pushed to their limits as hypotheses" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 52).

After all, verification amounts to finding an equivalent inside reality for a theory that aims to challenge it. In this sense, a possible verification might imply the disappearance of a theory grounded on this duality, a critical issue to consider seriously.

Instead, we can find out the strength of that form of thought only in the way reality reacts to Baudrillard and how, in turn, his thought responds. If there is resistance to being codified, there is an angle of incidence: it still makes some sense to think and to be in the world without succumbing to total integration. That is why it is legitimate, indeed crucial, to deal with our situation by scrutinising how the *pensée-Baudrillard* got where it got, that is, reacted to the real as it did. For the same reason, we most of all test his theoretical power in the events he did not have time to analyse. The world through Baudrillard, Baudrillard through the world: the question is the continuation of this antagonistic parallelism.

Disappearance: Searching for the Authentic Baudrillard

> "Thought waits to be woken one day by the memory of what has been missed" (Adorno, 1974, p. 81).

> "And God is lost in his ways and the ways are lost in God and truly divine is only this exhalation, this disappearing and forgetting of the one in the others and of the others in the one" (Agamben, 2022, p. 28).

"When I speak of a man, he's already dead" (Baudrillard, 2009, n. 9): a quote stolen from Queneau opens the last text before Baudrillard's death. The original reads: "If I speak of a man, he will soon be dead" (Queneau, 1943). The irony of the second quote, if we think that he effectively died two months later, is balanced by Baudrillard's variation: when we speak of something, it has already 'died'. In other words, there is no need to wait for its 'actual' death. But in what sense?

Baudrillard seems to consider more relevant than death something which occurs continuously, regularly, as we speak of things: their mode of appearing contemplates disappearance. This 'rule' is crucial to Baudrillard's theory.

> "Dying is nothing. You have to know how to disappear. Dying comes down to biological chance and that is of no consequence. Disappearing is of a far higher order of necessity. You must not leave it to biology to decide when you will disappear. To disappear is to pass into an enigmatic state which is neither life nor death. Some animals know how to do this, as do savages, who withdraw, while still alive, from the sight of their own people" (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 24)

For Baudrillard, "Our fundamental destiny is not to exist and survive" but "to appear and disappear" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 213). This peculiar idea is crucial, even applied to him as a theoretical object. The temptation to ask what happened to his thought after his death is replaced by this other issue: what happened to the object 'Baudrillard' as soon as someone spoke or wrote of it? How does the object appear as it seamlessly begins to disappear? Naturally, this implies looking at how Baudrillard dealt with other thinkers and how he conceived his disappearance — or, better, that of his theory. In any case, dealing with Baudrillard means dealing with Baudrillard's disappearance.

"Behind every image, something has disappeared". Behind any possible image we form of Baudrillard, Baudrillard disappears. However, searching for a 'true' Baudrillard beneath his disappearance would be wrong, as disappearance is how things appear. The famous false quote from the *Ecclesiastes* reveals this: "The simulacrum is never what hides the truth — it is truth which hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true" (Baudrillard, 1994a, p. 1). If truth exists, it is conceivable only in its disappearance. Disappearing does not mean dying and stopping appearing but entering another state, appearing in other forms. "For passing from one species to another, from one form to another is a means of *disappearing, not of dying*. To disappear is to disperse oneself in appearances" (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 44). Returning to the idea of singularity, we could say that we can only grasp it in its disappearance and metamorphosis. Even death is conceivable as a passage into a different form: "You don't disappear, you reappear, dead" (Dorn, 1993, p. 239).

This idea contradicts Western dichotomous metaphysics, which separates once and for all being and non-being, only to find expedients later to conceive how things become (on this, see Severino, 2016; Agamben, 2016). According to its (Aristotelean) common sense, appearing and disappearing would be incompatible, contradictory, and pertaining

to different 'moments'[33]. To this irreversible metaphysics, which he defined as the "order of production", based on making things visible and distinguishing what is real from what is not, Baudrillard opposed "an order of seduction", of appearances and their metamorphosis (Baudrillard, 1990c, n. 144)[34]. In this other version of the world, the continuous play of forms constructs only simulations, optical illusions, effects of reality and truth.

The game of appearing and disappearing is way more significant than the weak power of any construction. Only the illusion that this game is temporarily halted — that appearances temporarily rest in real, dichotomous identities — allows believing in the real world. In fact, "Things live only on the basis of their disappearance" (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 31): only the apparent disappearance of the singular becoming of forms allows us to conceive an identity. Since the object continues to appear and disappear as long as we speak of it, dealing with Baudrillard and attempting to build an account of his theories must consider this. The examination must concern the object's strategies of appearance and disappearance, which do not follow predetermined paths. If we take the man of Queneau's quote, it is clear that his appearance is not reducible to the history of his existence, as much as his disappearance is not reducible to his death.

As Agamben observes in *The Use of Bodies*, "singular existence" does not consist in one or more crystallisation that we assume during our life — whether it be the most salient achievement, or a traumatic fact occurred to us. At the same time, it cannot consist in our bare existence or the mere fact of having a human nature (or a certain individual defining quality). In the same way, the singularity of "a line of writing" does not consist either in the letters or the meaningless line of writing, taken as a geometric shape. Instead, in both cases, the singularity lies in how certain things appear in a peculiar way — their "incessant emergence", writes Agamben. The two elements are only distinguishable *in abstracto*. Concretely, "singular existence [...] is neither a substance nor a precise fact but an infinite series of modal oscillations, by means of which substance always constitutes and expresses itself" (Agamben, 2016, p. 172). In this

---

[33] The temporality of being is what allows Aristotle to resolve the problem of non-contradiction: one thing can have contradicting attributes at different times (see Aristotle, 1984, p. 3418).

[34] "The original sense of 'production' is not in fact that of material manufacture; rather, it means to render visible, to cause to appear and be made to appear: *pro-ducere*. [...] To produce is to force what belongs to another order (that of secrecy and seduction) to materialize. *Seduction* is that which is everywhere and always opposed to *production*; seduction withdraws something from the visible order and so runs counter to production, whose project is to set everything up in clear view, whether it be an object, a number, or a concept." (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 37).

sense, we could also say that singular existence amounts to how something or someone disappears into their own expressions. As Baudrillard puts it, "the point is that one becomes only what one is not" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 171). If we ignore this ceaseless transfusion and metamorphosis that constitutes appearances, identity and existence become the miserable procession of dead forms or the affirmation of what "is nothing in itself" (*Ibid.*).

Considering this, the other form of access to Baudrillard is via his singular formation, in how it finds new forms as we reinvent it — how it becomes what it is not. The *pensée-Baudrillard* lives based on its translation into new forms, of its metamorphoses in which we do not remain faithful to its results without shadowing its 'substance'. The authentic is the peculiar, singular form it takes in every passage, the specific way in which it illudes us to exist as a reality, a reality which disappears every time we attempt to grasp it. Baudrillard could not have been more explicit about what is the object's 'authenticity':

> "Objects are such that their disappearance changes them into themselves. It is how they mislead us and make their illusion. But it is also how they remain faithful to themselves and how we should be faithful to them: in their minute details, in their precise figuration, in the sensuous illusion of their appearance and connection" (Baudrillard and Guillaume, 2008, p. 147).

Paraphrasing Agamben, the essential trait, the nature of the object, "crosses over into existence" in its singularity "in a continuous way". It is "this incessant emergence" that "constitutes its expressivity" (Agamben, 2016, n. 172).

Although Agamben's philosophical language betrays the original distinction between substance and existence, we can use Baudrillard to say more explicitly that substance only exists as it disappears into singular existence. In our case, this would mean that there is no authentic Baudrillard before its dispersion into its many appearances (or, the same thing, disappearances). At the same time, this does not mean we find Baudrillard's singularity in *any* appearance. On the contrary, we have to remain faithful to the object in the "minute details" and "precise figuration" of its dispersion: not all ways of translating Baudrillard into new forms are 'practicable'. We can neither crystallise nor liquefy Baudrillard.

Forget Remembrance: What Does Baudrillard Want from Us?

> "Theory itself must anticipate its own destiny, because for every thought one must expect a strange tomorrow. Theory is, at any rate, destined to be diverted, deviated, and manipulated. It would be better for theory to divert itself, than to be diverted from itself" (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 81)

In *Dopo Nietzsche* [After Nietzsche], the Italian philosopher Giorgio Colli[35] recounts that "on the frontispiece of some sixteenth-century editions of Niccolò Machiavelli [...] the name of the author is scornfully erased by an unknown hand, with a pen's scratch". His 'sin', which Colli compares to Nietzsche's, was "speaking to the present with true hardness" (Colli, 1977, p. 17). As Serge Latouche reconstructs in his exhaustive monography, Baudrillard could have never encountered a similar destiny. His *damnatio*, if it ever existed, has never been that 'spectacular' and, for this reason, did not produce a correspondent legacy of "nonconformist spirits" interested in it (Latouche, 2019, p. 14). On the contrary, its fate seems to correspond to an automatic disqualification, particularly in academic circles — one would be tempted to agree that "Baudrillard did not take place" (Corcuff, 2007), at least not in full.

Instead, overturning the matter, can we think it was never possible to realise him? Might the peculiar form he pursued have prevented his realisation as a canonical author? In this regard, William Pawlet reminds us: "Accessing Baudrillard's contribution to sociology is exceptionally problematic because his aim seems to have been to destroy it, or at least to observe its self-destruction" (Pawlett, 2007, p. 2). This suggests definitively abandoning a canonical consideration and, nevertheless, poses the problem of how to take Baudrillard's work in a 'serious' way.

Returning to how his work was received, Baudrillard's cancellation was never needed, as a spontaneous refusal to engage with him prevailed, and his work went spontaneously "out of fashion" (Latouche, 2019, p. 14). At the same time, and with seemingly equal spontaneity, his work continues to seduce and stimulate new, mostly niche, publications, as if by a kind of "viral infiltration". What he said of other forms of violence and threat could be applied to his own "theoretical violence" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 5):

> "One might argue, alternatively, that there have been some positive disappearances: of violence, threats, illness or death, but we know that everything repressed or eliminated in this way results in a malign, viral infiltration of the social and individual body" (Baudrillard, 2009, pp. 28–31).

Even the publications which defend Baudrillard often seem to betray a subtle temptation to protect his work — making one wonder whether, otherwise, they would naturally disappear into nothingness. Intending to interpret the Baudrillardian view on

---

[35] Editor of the world's first edition of Nietzsche's complete works.

the issue, Latouche rightfully writes that "*Forget*" and "*remember*" are "the two poles of the same phenomenon" (*Ibid.*, p. 17).

Both approaches seem to imply that Baudrillard's thought does not have a living, singular destiny in itself, that, since the author is dead, his thinking has, too, become passive, inert—ready for the museum of thought. The whole set of different reasons to forget or remember is derived from this, suggesting that what happens to Baudrillard's thinking depends upon us, subjects, and not *upon the object itself* and the way it has already seduced us.

In this subjective spirit, chronicling the question of the fate encountered by Baudrillard, Latouche propends for this exhortation: "We need to read, or reread, Baudrillard, we who are immersed in the current events of a world which he saw coming, we who aspire to subtract ourselves from its mainstream". He then goes on to say that, for instance, Ludovic Leonelli has found twenty additional reasons to support this idea (Latouche, 2019, p. 17; Leonelli, 2007, pp. 157–158).

Perhaps doing this exercise is inevitable—the first paragraphs of this chapter have done something similar. But what about Baudrillard's specific destiny as a singular object in the theoretical universe (tangentially, one of his central themes)? What do we do with it? What does it want from us? Along with the need to reread him, we must remember Baudrillard's jubilant exhortation that "Things have to be lost!", that references and "thoughts have to be anagrammatized in what one does" — 'originally' absorbed and reinvented, we could say — and not reduced to a "definition" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 6). In light of this, can we still think we have to defend Baudrillard or should we let him disappear in new, felicitous forms instead?

Effectively, the attempts to strictly 'remember' risk being caught in the irony of "an immense work of mourning" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 62) along the lines of this question: "if he is unknown to the new generations, must we exhume him?" (Latouche, 2019, p. 17). The expression makes us wonder who is dead and when one is actually dead. Can we so firmly suppose that we are the ones who are alive, as we are worried about Baudrillard's vanishing? Or is this way of thinking, arbitrary and subjective, the sign that we have already lost the life of this thought, its "objectal vehemence" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 87)[36], the literalness of 'Baudrillard as-it-is'? Is all this, including its apparent not taking

---

[36] In a few places, Baudrillard uses the terms *objectality* [literally 'objectity'] and the relative adjectives to distinguish his conception from that of *objectivity*, which implies the dialectic between subject and object rather than an immediate confrontation: "Not objectivity in the scientific sense, but radical *objectality* (*objectite*)" (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 52). The same term, "objectity [*Objektität*]" is used by Heidegger (e.g. Heidegger, 2004, pp. 250–252), from which Baudrillard has drawn much inspiration. "Radical objectivity

place, an ironical strategy of Baudrillard's thought, and the confirmation *in concreto* of the limitation of our perspective as inhabitants of Integral Reality?

Baudrillard's conspicuous absence, evident from a rough phenomenology of today's sociology and philosophy departments, immediately introduces the crucial question of Baudrillard's writings. The question (and challenge) is whether all can be reduced to reality and its architecture (subjectivity, productivity, will, desire, history). In particular, this would mean that Baudrillard's significance depends upon specific goals or solutions that his theory allows us to achieve. Conversely, does its form disclose something irreducible to the order of reality, even when integral reality seems to disqualify it automatically?

Baudrillard's work is a bet on this hypothesis, on the existence of inappropriable, *objectal* strategies, thanks to which objects (theoretical ones, too) evade their *reductio ad realitatem*. In this light, if his interest veered towards a "wild phenomenology" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 187) of "*the world as it is, which is not in any sense the real world*" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 68), our aim will be similar. The exploration of the object Baudrillard's objectal strategies implies conceiving a wild phenomenology of *Baudrillard as it is*, which is not in any sense the real Baudrillard. In other words, how has Baudrillard's thought managed to avoid its realisation? What peculiar qualities make it irreducible to schematisation? We must examine this form of disappearance.

The Other by the Other

> "Doubtless one should put oneself in the position of an imaginary traveller who came upon these writings as if they were a lost manuscript and, for want of supporting documents, subsequently strove to reconstitute the society they describe" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. vii).

We have yet to consider how Baudrillard considered his work. In two occasions in which he wrote about this, he used some curious expressions as explicit or implicit titles: "The Other by Himself", in Jean-Louis Violeau's words, his "pretended" *habilitation* [Authorisation to Direct Research] (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 10) and "Himself by the Other" in *Hétérodafé* (Baudrillard, 2004b). In both texts, Baudrillard

---

is the exact opposite of the objectivity of science. The one addresses the rationality of partial processes, the other the irony of the overall process" (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 101).

rejects the idea of a reconstruction or a genealogy of his *oeuvre*, which he considers impossible.

"It is paradoxical," he wrote in the first one, "to make a retrospective survey of a work which never intended to be prospective" (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 17). Here "prospective" literally means 'forward-looking', that is, a work which projects and predicts its future 'end', both in the sense of goal and conclusion. It would be a form of teleological writing that Baudrillard could not contemplate, believing as he did that words and ideas "have a life on their own", that "an idea becomes more – and something other – than itself: a 'form of thought'" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. ix). It is almost as if Baudrillard spoke here of a "form of life" (Agamben, 2016, p. 277): indeed, in a late interview, he uses the verb 'to appear' to describe how specific ideas emerged in his work.

His early career was still concerned with the destruction of "conventional" concepts or, in his words, with taking "the terms to their limits, show up their emptiness", making "them disqualify themselves in order to open up other issues" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, pp. 8–9). The approach still echoes Adorno's idea of "the dialectic", which "advances by way of extremes, driving thoughts with the utmost consequentiality to the point where they turn back on themselves, instead of qualifying them" (Adorno, 1974, p. 86). However, then, something different occurred: "It was at that point that simulacrum, seduction, the hyperreal and the fateful [*le fatal*] appeared: terms not substitutable for one another, but succeeding each other and unfolding in a kind of spiral" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 9).

The spiral, pataphysical symbol (Hugill, 2012, p. 6), evokes the inexorable precipitation of thinking and writing towards a never reached and perhaps absent centre. But the spiral is not a pre-determined trajectory: it illustrates, *a posteriori*, the prevalence of a different logic, in which terms are concatenated non-dialectically. Baudrillard recalls having abandoned "conceptual" language and "objective signification" to recognise the prevalence of this other logic "of escalation". From being "an instrument of the production of meaning", it started "imposing its own surprises", following a "material articulation" having to do with "a literalness which has its own rules". Along the spiral, the metamorphoses of one term into the other started occurring 'automatically', following a "rhythm" rather than a dialectical development. Therefore, once inaugurated in the spiral, there is a guiding principle which almost appears as a strategy of language itself: "What we mean is what we say, but it's also what *it* wants to say" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 9). The further reinventions of Baudrillard's material — including the 'misunderstandings' — demonstrate that there is more to it than the author intended. The spiral symbolises these two complementary aspects, suggesting an almost predestined inertia in the succession of concepts and a continuous deviation from an imagined linearity. At the same time, foreseeing the next concept in this 'precipitation' of ideas is impossible. The spiral signals that what belongs to Baudrillard (his productions) and what belongs to language (its seductions) exist simultaneously: they are effectively indistinguishable and form the singularity of the work.

The risk of looking at it retrospectively, as if it were the author's project, is to miss its form entirely. Ignoring the second spiral implies the immediate disappearance of its singular form, as Orpheus did, looking back on Eurydice (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 17). It would do violence to a work which effectively, even after Baudrillard's death, remains inevitably open and incomplete. What is work in it is a *form of thought* which crosses through the crystallisations of each book, of each idea, of each fragment, and which involves primarily the materiality of language rather than conceptuality and signification.

In this sense, we can see that any proper theoretical work never reaches its end, its centre, arbitrarily: is not the fact that we can return to its intensity and achieve different destinations a clue of its ongoing form of life? For this reason, Agamben leaves this sentence at the end of his twenty-year *oeuvre*: "every work of poetry and of thought [...] cannot be concluded but only abandoned (and perhaps continued by others)" (Agamben, 2016, p. xiii). In Baudrillard's case, even the author himself returns as an 'other' to continue what he previously abandoned.

Returning to the dispute between forgetting and remembering, we see that the two are not antithetical. The work is abandoned (forgotten) and continued (remembered) repeatedly, as long as we mean by the work the form of thought which appears in it and not simply its conceptual content. "You never liberate a form; it's the form that enchains you" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 11): in other words, if you let a form appear in your work, you will have to follow it, accept the turns it imposes and the unforeseen destinations it takes you to. Considering the autonomy of thought, we better understand how Baudrillard looked back on his work: "One must pretend that the work preexisted to itself and forebode its own end from the very beginning. [...] pretend that this work were accomplished, that it developed in a coherent manner and has always existed" (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 17).

In practice, Baudrillard resorts to an exercise of simulation, considering the work he had conceived as the work of someone else—or, better, as a radiating object with its singularity. Considering this, he calls the text *L'Autre par Lui-meme* [The Other by Himself]. The text is concerned with the theoretical objects that crossed the sky of Baudrillard's work and took it (and him) by transposition and metamorphosis "along unforeseen channels not calculated in advance" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. 3). It appears entirely legitimate to treat them as the work of someone (or something) else—thought as an "inhuman function", as he elsewhere wrote (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 21). These suggestions are also crucial for any 'other' who, even more humbly, aims to do the same exercise with Baudrillard as one's own 'other'—the situation here could be defined as *the Other by Other*.

In sum, since the beginning, when thought appeared to Baudrillard himself, there is no way of conceiving an authentic version other than in its 'disappearing dispersion' in the plurality of its singular expressions. Baudrillard is not a reference but a form of thought,

a form of life: as every thinking that has not already become a conceptual corpse, the only way to remain faithful to it is to live it fully. We could interpret a rather brutal quote from *America* in this way. "The point is not to write the sociology or psychology of the car, the point is to drive. That way you learn more about this society than all academia could ever tell you", he wrote (Baudrillard, 1988). We could paraphrase that the point is not to write the sociology or psychology of Baudrillard. The point is to think, to live his thought and to allow his work to *think us back*. Are we preserving its survival in this way? No, we only become agents of its unheard-of appearances as it continues to disappear, if we are lucky, in further 'states of grace'.

What Baudrillard's form of thought can still say, "what *it* wants to say" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 9), can only be found out by accepting to run down its spiral of disappearance. With Baudrillard's biological death, we can do nothing more than some fetishist-romantic pilgrimages to his tablet-shaped grave in Montparnasse. But even that would give us a hint, as we will see.

THE IRRUPTION OF THINGS:
A TAKE-OFF WITHOUT REFERENCES

Introduction: The Interruption of Theory and the Irruption of Things

As shown in the method, the radicality of Baudrillard's theory consists in assuming our unprecedented condition in full. Assuming it means both ascertaining its existence and drawing its inevitable consequences. The passage to integral reality is a radical view of the systematic liquidation of the singularity of the world that began with the decision to transform the world into reality. In the wake of Elias Canetti and Günther Anders[37], Baudrillard considers this destiny *the final metaphysical and anthropological revolution.* Paradoxically, the philosophy of the subject that grounded reality has allowed reality to grow at its expense until the urge to integrate everything expelled human subjectivity from it. This coincides with the epoch in which the human species has experimented with the possibility of its physical annihilation.

As we have seen, the singular form of human thought, co-implicated in the illusion of the world, cannot be reduced to a reality and a virtual operation. But virtual reality does precisely this, transforming the problem of the difference between subject and object

---

[37] As we will see further in the chapter, in 1945, the first claimed that humankind "suddenly left reality" (Canetti, 1978, p. 69). For his part, Anders considered the epoch characterised by the possibility of nuclear annihilation "the *final one*" (Anders, 1980, p. 20).

and representation into problems of codification, data and formulas. However, this is a sign that the course of events was already no longer in the hands of a subject. If these technological materialisations appeared, a previous decision to hand over our destiny to technology was taken, and this might be the decision to transform the world into reality. Baudrillard situated the "events, the discoveries, the visions" of which "[w]e are merely epigones" in the years "between 1910 and 1940" (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 149), just before Canetti made his statement. This is when the conclusions of much older 'decisions' explode.

In Baudrillard, the idea of an unidentifiable yet decisive point when this occurs generates "a clear desire to sweep away the whole culture based on the philosophical subject" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 3). This echoes back to Nietzsche and the philosophy of nihilism, which dismantled the limits of modern reason, recognised as impostures masking a more fundamental energy, which he tried to reduce to "the will to power" (see Nietzsche, 1966, 1967a, 1967b). Everything that grounded its value on the objective, dialectical relation between the subject and the world can only be seen as entirely immersed in the play of appearances — the will to power can be considered as a conceptualisation of this inappropriable energy of appearances, as the way the forms of the world appear and disappear.

In this condition, the rules of subjective thought are overturned: representation and referentiality fall into the immanence of the world's appearances. This reveals that what was seen as a subjective initiative was some other strategy. As the foundations of the subject fall, appearances and their *fatal strategies* irrupt the theoretical architecture and impose a change of direction.

This chapter examines how Baudrillard's thought deals with this radically other paradigm that does not admit the idea of subjective representation and the reality of references. Both become *forms of thought* with a life on their own, between which the non-dialectical rules of appearances — "play, challenges, duels" (Baudrillard, 1990c, p. 7) and what has to do with game and illusion — reign. In light of this, after *Symbolic Exchange and Death* and mainly since *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard draws the conclusions anticipated in his previous works and radically reinvents his theorisation and writing. Everything has to account for the illusoriness of the world and coherently assume a form irreducible to any reality.

Not simply becoming more elusive by hiding its references 'anagrammatically', Baudrillard's theory also turns into a pure object and pure act: it plays the game rather than representing it. It absorbs and amplifies the radicality of the world in its form instead of critiquing it. The dialectic with reality is replaced by a radical dualistic confrontation based on the simultaneous affinity (they are both illusions) and alterity (one challenges the other) of theory and its object.

The chapter outlines the logic of these steps and the strategy that Baudrillard's thinking follows. Baudrillard treats his references and authors without regard, seeking to radicalise their *form* and draw their extreme consequences. This logic aims to bring our interminable reality (including our theoretical one) to its points of exhaustion. Since the early texts, Baudrillard aims at this point of rupture in the form of thought itself, a break in the continuity and linearity of discourse. This rupture cannot simply concern content but must radically transform the material style of thought.

The discursive form is adequate for deconstructing objective reality, investigating its causes and deducing its consequences. As the chapter on criticism examines, this work of deconstruction and reconstruction (decoding and encoding) has become automatic and entirely integrated into reality's functioning. Critical discourse assumes ideological contours, deluding us into thinking that this decoding can still be in the hands of the human subject.

Conversely, Baudrillard's aphoristic theory aims to establish a horizon of singularity and irreducibility, which is precisely antithetical to discourse. The aphorism-thought establishes *an insurmountable alterity that prevents its integral realisation*: its success corresponds with the impossibility of translating its form into a conceptual reality or an ultimate signification. The aphorism presents itself as an impenetrable object that can either be accepted or rejected as such — something akin to what happened to Baudrillard himself.

Because of this objectual singularity it expresses, Baudrillard considers thought as the refraction and coagulation of the world's material becoming. At the limit of a process started with the "Big Bang" and the appearance of light, Baudrillard argues, the world finally reflects on itself. However, that is "not the end-point" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 140), and this urges theory to follow this destiny further. While it asks where this metamorphosis will take it, it is already participating in it: this is how thought alters the world.

This is also the principle of literalness: the singularity of the world, the destiny of its forms, reverberates and crystallizes in thought. But thought is never the "bare result" (Hegel, 1977, p. 3), it is a play of forms itself which, by their own becoming, alter the world further. In this way, the world thinks us as we think it.

In this way, literal thought unmasks *the trick of reality: to deny singularity when it itself results from a perfectly singular development*. The integral reality which attempts to eradicate all singularity and illusion from the world, is part of the destiny of the world, of its radical illusion and the play of appearances — *a radical reversion*. Baudrillard's fragmentary writing aims to reaffirm this illusion, ensuring that all is never entirely said and revealed. His peculiar style seeks to render his theories without equivalents, to show that nothing has, deep down, a real equivalent. The chapter investigates all these aspects and attempts to bring out its strategic and polemical significance.

> "The progressive absence of references to authors or to the history of ideas is logical: the 'fatal' does not encumber itself with citations. [...] The style of the fragment, particularly since Nietzsche, has always stimulated me. It's writing that is non-dialectic, disruptive, indifferent to its origin and to its end, a literal transcription of objective irony that I believe I can read directly in the state of things itself" (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 159)

Conventional elements disappear from Baudrillard's work until what qualifies an academic text — or theory in general? — is almost completely abandoned more or less after the 1976 text *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. This led many commentators to speak of "two Baudrillard" (see Latouche, 2019, pp. 25–42), with a "radically different regime of thought" emerging after the text above (Baudrillard and Guillaume, 2008, p. 12n). L'Yvonnet signals that there are many readers, "more than one can imagine", who consider the very 'first' Baudrillard "readable and acceptable" and the 'second' one "much more disquieting, at the limit of the incomprehensible" (L'Yvonnet, 2013, pp. 46–47). "The second Baudrillard would be exoteric", concludes Latouche in his recent monography on his former colleague (2019, p. 38). The logic of this absent linearity is essential to understanding whether Baudrillard renounces referentiality altogether — in a post-modern fashion — or works with another principle. Detecting Baudrillard's actual *'references'* is critical to conceiving a *sui generis* 'literature review'.

Schematically, the 'first' Baudrillard is still concerned with an equally unconventional yet still deconstructive thought. In particular, his analyses comprised identifying what disappeared under the semiotic order of objects (1996c), the logic of consumption (1998b), the paradigms of political economy and linguistics (1981) and the Marxist concept of production (1975). The 'summa' of this period is *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, which encompasses all of these and the "metaphysics of the code" which regulates modern societies (1993b). In this phase, we observe Baudrillard dealing with a more conventional conceptual apparatus, which he nevertheless applies unconventionally and beyond the orthodox labels attributed to him (Marxist, post-Marxist, etc.). Baudrillard admits: "The concepts from the early days still belong to conventional language", to the "common repertoire of the disciplines that were prevalent at the time: anthropology, semiology, psychoanalysis...". However, he felt there was already "a requirement to deconstruct them. Or rather, not to deconstruct them, but take the terms to their limits, show up their emptiness. To make them disqualify themselves in order to open up other issues" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, pp. 8–9).

From this, it is evident that *an inherent and inexorable logic guides the articulation of Baudrillard's thought*, which directs the reality of theories toward their vanishing point. Although not entirely explicit (and perhaps intentional), a destructive rather than merely deconstructive impulse guides these texts. Baudrillard could not admit a simple deconstruction that would not end in a proper liquidation, as he thought: "Nothing is more constructive than deconstruction, which exhausts itself in passing the world

through the sieve of the text" (Baudrillard, 1996a, p. 25). This illuminates why, even from the start, we see an implacable series of destructions (as the ones mentioned in the introduction).

The Consumer Society, one of the early 'acceptable' books, ends with a fierce attack on "the 'critical' discourse and the moralizing protest", which he considers having the "true responsibility for the elaboration of the myth" of consumption. "It is that discourse which locks us definitively into the mythic and prophetic teleology of the 'Civilization of the Object'", he claims. "It is that discourse which, being itself much more fascinated by the Object than either common sense or the grassroots consumer, transfigures it into a mythic and fascinated anti-object critique" (Baudrillard, 1998b, p. 195). As it aims to deconstruct and reform social reality, critique becomes ideology *tout court*: its moderation (accepting reality, just not this version of it) justifies the horizon of reality. It only provides "the counter-melody within the [same] formal liturgy of the Object", reifying its myth and rendering reality more 'complete', more totalised. Like the art critic with the work of art, even the harshest critique owes its existence to the existence of social reality — there is "no *real* distance" between them (*Ibid.*, p. 196): they share the same reality principle.

Instead, Baudrillard attacks the *reality* of its resulting lullaby, in which the critical 'melody' plays its part. Using the musical metaphor, *he attacks the harmonic rules, thanks to which both the melody and the counter-melody can be played*. Here, we already see the process of radicalisation that Baudrillard considers unavoidable, and according to which a radical hypothesis is only that which is pushed to its limit. He points out that once our deconstruction goes radical, becoming destruction, we already "know that the Object is nothing" and that — the result of the book — "behind it stands the tangled void of human relations" (*Ibid.*). The imposture of reality is already recognised, and his first *reference* becomes the nothingness it reveals, the illusoriness that points toward an approach different from critique. Having seen the inessential nature of reality, we can only "await for the violent irruptions and sudden disintegrations which will come" (*Ibid.*, p. 196). Baudrillard seems to think these disintegrations are already implied by how it is 'constructed' on nothing.

For this reason, *radical thought cannot be content with a provisional restructuration of nothingness: once it has reached its root, it cannot do anything else than bring it out.* "I like to explore in my writing what happens when something ends" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 186). Radical thought is only conceivable as a *philosophy of disappearance* — *always remembering that disappearances prepare the appearance of some other singularity.*

In effect, the disintegrations continue. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, which still belongs to the 'readable' Baudrillard, we find a long, and even decisively technical, parallel discussion of the structure of political economy and signification. Here, too, the analysis culminates in a crucial passage, where Baudrillard identifies in "the logic of the sign" and "in those of exchange value and political economy" nothing

less than "All the repressive and reductive strategies of power systems". In the face of this, "Only total revolution, theoretical and practical, can restore the symbolic in the demise of the sign and of value. Even signs must burn" (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 163). Although Baudrillard will lose faith in the possibility of restoring the symbolic (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 177), this literally incendiary approach survives in examining what happens when things approach their points of reversibility and, once again, the literalness of the world re-emerges from reality. This is what it means to side with the world and its strategies: opting for the reversibility inscribed in the destiny of each thing.

Ingrained Memories: Anagrammatizing the Unsaid

> "In order for there to be a reality, there has to be a principle of reference, a principle of signification, a principle of reality. Yes, I do contest it. There is a challenge there [in my work] to all that, including the use of language: in a way I'm also doing a critique of the use-value of language. So in this case theory no longer aims solely to signify something, or certainly it doesn't exhaust itself in the process of signification. It has to invent another object, it has to invent another world as it were" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 31)

While he rejects conventional referentiality, Baudrillard considers his master authors as both less and more than a reference: referring to Nietzsche, as we have seen, he used the term "ingrained memory" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 1). This hints at why he rejected the conventional notion of 'reference', only to make it into something else. Some authors enter so deeply into his thought that they become indistinguishable from it. Applying his idea of reversibility, Baudrillard simultaneously copies and distorts (indeed, 'metamorphose') these authors by remaining true to how their spirit impacted his thought.

Coherent with the idea that singularity is its becoming, it discovers them most authentically by reinventing them — in Latin, *invenio* indicates both verbs. He uses them the most faithfully by betraying them — if *tradere* ('to betray') evokes 'to hand over' in its etymology, their translation-betrayal is how Baudrillard 'takes in' his references. "With this obsession, into the bargain, that's almost a perversion, of trying to forget, to obliterate, to eliminate things — the things closest to me" (*Ibid.*, p. 10). This *ciphering* operation is carried to the point at which their traces disappear, and this also preserves them from their realisation into a univocal interpretation. In the typically Baudrillardian

'ecstatic' logic[38], we could say that references are taken so literally that they become more than themselves — *hyper-references*.

The only way of preserving their singularity consists in sacrificing them as properly called references: "these thoughts have to be anagrammatized in what one does. That is to say, the concept or definition has to pass out of sight; they have to be there only in the anagrammatic state. All this has to disappear, to scatter, like the anagram of the name of God in the poem" (*Ibid.*, p. 6). Baudrillard's relation with previous thinkers and theories is not one of use without credit. It consists of acknowledging the mutual contamination — *as you use the object, the object uses you back to complete further metamorphoses*, we could paraphrase. Ingrained memories are arguably more than references, as they show through his writings in their literal unfolding — to the extent we can legitimately ask: *who becomes the author*? The actual author seems to be equally the becoming of the world and the illusory appearance we call 'the author'. From this, we can draw the principle that a 'good' author is the one who preserves and 'dramatises' this becoming, allowing the world to transpire:

> "The self has its existence, its name, its history, and it changes, it identifies with itself, but I think it's always haunted by something other than what it is; it's haunted by what it could have become! This is very noticeable in poetic language. In Hölderlin, for example: his poetry is a perpetual becoming; he is successively the rivers he speaks of, his indwelling gods. He is not an identitary self, toying with his self-transformation into various figures; he is the theatre of the metamorphosis of rivers, gods and landscapes. It's not he who changes, but the rivers and gods which metamorphose through him. He makes room for a universal metamorphosis" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 83).

Baudrillard's use of quotes beyond the (academic) political correctness is a deliberate choice to preserve this becoming. More interesting than the quotes modified or

---

[38] In the first pages of *Fatal Strategies,* titled "Ecstasy and Inertia", we find this idea condensed in this way: "We will find subtle forms of radicalizing secret qualities; we will fight obscenity with its own weapons. To the truer than true we will oppose the falser than false. We will not oppose the beautiful to the ugly, but will look for the uglier than ugly: the monstrous. We will not oppose the visible to the hidden, but will look for the more hidden than hidden: the secret. We will not be looking for change, and will not oppose the fixed to the mobile; we will look for the more mobile than mobile: metamorphosis... We will not distinguish the true from the false, but will look for the falser than false: illusion and appearance.... In this ascent to extremes, we should perhaps radically oppose obscenity and seduction; but, perhaps, their effects are cumulative. We will be looking for something faster than communication: challenge, the duel" (Baudrillard, 1990b, pp. 25–26)

altogether invented[39], the actual use of referencelessness is found in the anagrammatic method. As opposed to the genealogy of ideas which preserves their identity, Baudrillard's is a literal transposition of metamorphosis, where what counts is not the identity-reality but the singular potential. The absorption of what comes from the other reinforces the singularity of the author and that of his references.

> "It is like your thought being turned out by someone else, who returns it to you as if you had given it to them. The fact that someone could have thought it before you is a shared sign, a predestined sign, like an object which offers itself to the lens. This pleasure of quotation is, then, extremely rare, and should remain so" (Baudrillard, 2003a, p. 100)

Authors are not realities, that is, a set of certain conceptualisations they would merely stand for. Likewise, this predestination is not the proof of the author's greatness but, instead, the idea of a recurrence of singular forms. This means that authors are, simultaneously, less and more than identities, since they are appearances of a form of thought: "successive metaphorizations means that an idea becomes more — and something other — than itself: a 'form of thought'" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. ix). Among singularities, as Agamben shows in *On Method*, one moves without mediations by the simple metamorphosis of one form into the other: a movement that "is neither inductive nor deductive but analogical. It moves from singularity to singularity" (Agamben, 2009a, p. 31). Instead of the rigid dichotomy of the same and the other, singularity is the becoming-other "irreducible to any of the dichotomy's two terms" (*Ibid.*, p. 19).

> "Singularities are, therefore, inexpressible by each other, and between them there can, therefore, be only a play of metamorphosis of the one into the other on the basis of *their non-existence as self-being* [*être-propre*]" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 170).

According to this logic, we do not move from the particular forms of Baudrillard's authors to Baudrillard's particularity according to common general concepts. Instead, the movement is a metamorphosis between analogical singularities, that is, singularities having an analogous form. It is "in the form", Baudrillard argues, that "the pleasure of writing lies". What renders an idea a form of thought is not its content but "the form" they "assume", which has to be "a felicitous one". Whereas people, Baudrillard says, are

---

[39] A famous one is the opening of *Simulacra and Simulation* credited to the *Ecclesiastes* (Baudrillard, 1994a, p. 1). But Baudrillard cultivated this habit until the last work, where he opens with an uncredited, modified quote of one of Queneau's poems, 'L'explication des metaphores', (Queneau, 1943 in; Baudrillard, 2009, p. 9).

"generally sensitive only to the content", his interest lies in "the implicit seductiveness of what's left unsaid" by it (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 10). This is the horizon of metamorphosis and the anagram:

> "We have to get back to the anagrammatic use of language; if there is an idea, it has to be anagrammatized in language and so disappear as idea. There is, then, a kind of complicity here between anamorphosis, anagrams and the aphorism" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 27).

"Thought waits to be woken one day by the memory of what has been missed", Adorno wrote (Adorno, 1974, p. 81). This "unsaid" is the singular form into which a thought appears and is not translatable into a conceptual equivalent: it is only usable for further metamorphoses, for other seductions ('deviations', as Baudrillard understands them). Through its "jouissance", through the play of its singular forms, "language [...] thinks us" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 11). Forms of thought think Baudrillard's one as it thinks them. Baudrillard's form of thought thinks us as we think it. This is the first way to characterise his underlying idea of what we could call *hyper-references* or *pass-references* (echoing his fortunate expression of pass-words).

Confrontation: The Possibility of Another Game

> "I think that theory is not so much a kind of lineage of references, a continuity, but rather a confrontation, an antagonism, a kind of duel between the object and theory, between the real and theory. So it's no longer so much the real or reality as a reference, but rather the reference would be the confrontation itself, the antagonism between the object and theory" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 30)

> "It isn't literature and it isn't a frivolous play. I would like it to appear serious, to be a theory, but not one that reflects the objective – rather one that is a challenge to reality, to the principle of reality" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 97).

The previous discussion makes us wonder what the sense of uncovering "the effaced traces" (Latouche, 2019, pp. 43–82) would be. Baudrillard has complicated things, explicitly refusing to belong to an existing tradition or assume a critical position within reality (what would be called a political position). Its sense paradoxically appears to be *a cut-off from the very logic of reality, which also includes the idea of referentiality* toward texts. At first sight, there could be an understandable temptation to declare the disappearance of 'theory' as such from it, but is the following work just literature? Neither conceding nor simply accepting this, I ask myself how a so-called literature review could become if we took the whole Baudrillard 'seriously' (at least academically

speaking) but also more literally[40]. Indeed, for a thinker who radically questions the idea of referentiality itself, we cannot be content to apply the same old methodology unproblematically.

To grasp the sense of Baudrillard's cut-off, we should remember that it does not derive from a dismissal of referentiality in general but of referentiality based on the reality of theories. Its shift is not from subjective representation to postmodernist arbitrariness but toward a more radical form. What preludes it is the discovery-invention of the other 'sense', "the possibility of another game" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 36), that is, an altogether different "way of moving through the world other than by following the thread of the real" (Musil, 1999, p. 123; quoted in Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 38). This does not indicate another world, a utopia untouched by the operation of integral reality (it would simply mean that reality and referentiality transfer to another dimension).

What interests him is a *mode* different from the real to look at the world. It is not recovering an original version of things or discovering an exoteric dimension. These are different versions of the idea of seeking the 'realest' reality, whose supremacy they confirm as a principle. If reality destroys appearances, fabricates the neuter and constructs a manipulable order, its reversion reveals it as a late form of the play of appearances. In the wake of Nietzsche, "the will to truth" is "a derivative and an avatar" of the "will to illusion". In this perspective, contrary to the conventional scheme, "rationality, culminating in technical virtuality, might be the last of the ruses of unreason" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 5), as it destroys the rules of the game of the world as it is. The object Baudrillard emerges from that very point where this other sense, this more radical 'reason' of the world, appears.

> "Things have found a way of avoiding a dialectics of sense that was beginning to bore them" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 25, translation modified)

It is the beginning, without any further explanation, of *Fatal Strategies*. It is the beginning of Baudrillard, which the previous books all presaged. No turning point, no 'second Baudrillard', no oracular emphasis whatsoever: we might as well have found another quotation, never mind this one. What does matter is that *the essential* is condensed here, in this idea — later claimed by himself — of a "'take-off' without references" (Baudrillard,

---

[40] Recently, William Pawlet confirmed the need to consider both aspects together: "Baudrillard was serious, and he often takes us just a little further than we want to go" (Pawlett, 2020).

2015, p. 62)[41]. And the book in which Baudrillard's thought finds its *vanishing point* is doubtlessly *Fatal Strategies*, from which it starts to scatter in countless fragments of equally fragmented texts — as I will examine, countlessly repeating the same single idea in numerous anamorphic books. Latouche agrees that this, when also "the analysis of terrorism" appears in Baudrillard's thought, is "the moment of its detachment from critique (a notion still understood, by the time, in a Marxist perspective), and, in a way, its culmination" (Latouche, 2019, p. 23).

Of course, one will object that there was a Baudrillard before Baudrillard: the one of *The System of Objects* (Baudrillard, 1996c), of *The Consumer Society* (Baudrillard, 1998b), the one that made Saussure, Marx, and Foucault disappear in the radicalisation of their theories (Baudrillard, 1993b, 1975, 1981, 2007), or the social in "the silent majorities" (Baudrillard, 1983a). But only when Baudrillard achieves the same result for himself does he finally reach that "*sort of state of grace*" that, as he writes, comes from disappearing. Only once his genealogy and history have been obliterated, the singular event of thought takes place: disappearance is not the end of the past, but the way in which the past is absorbed by a pure singularity and is revealed as its retrospective echo. It is what liquidates the past in a state of grace, in a felicitous constellation.

> "When you succeed not in destroying something but in obliterating its origins and its end, it disappears (the solution to the problem of the illusionist?). It is not, however, physically dead. It remains resplendent *in a sort of state of grace which is that of disappearance*. It inaugurates a second, pure and empty form of the event or person, *which is the form of fate*" (Baudrillard, 1990a, pp. 91–92).

True, there was a Baudrillard before Baudrillard. But, if we take him seriously, this has nothing essential. Baudrillard's destiny and its symbolic stake are condensed in this idea, applied to reality as much as to himself.

Reconstructions of existence belong to a sense that is — playing on words — devoid of sense. They are, precisely, a reconstruction in which the singular metamorphosis of the thing is, in any case, lost. That is why it is unnecessary to emphasise where one starts

---

[41] In the full quote, an answer to a question on subjectivity, Baudrillard openly admits to ignoring a conventional philosophical approach in favour of a kind of situationist strategy: "My reply here perhaps justifies the barrier philosophers have put up against me to some extent, in that my thinking isn't grounded in a study of the history of ideas, of Kant, and so on. I decided rather on a kind of 'take-off' without references, creating an almost artificial situation, a kind of radical phenomenology...." (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 62).

from, or what one proceeds with. Cultivating the singular, irreducible form is essential: the "'being so,' of everything that is" (Calasso, 2020, p. 66). What Nietzsche said of causality (Nietzsche, 1967b, p. 264), Baudrillard repeats of genealogies: both have the sole function of reabsorbing the literal potential of a thing, the singularity equivalent to nothing that they destroy — an objection all the more valid for a work that claims to have never been "prospective" (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 17). These impostures comfort us that something makes linear sense, whereas "what's essential is going on elsewhere" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 31). But then, what is the essential and singular aspect of this approach?

When he says that it is "things" that "have found a way of avoiding a dialectics of sense that was beginning to bore *them*" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 25, my emphasis), Baudrillard is speaking in a way that is completely unheard of. It is not the subject that decrees that something has had its day *but realizes that its own day already came.* As we said, there is no genealogy that makes the subject infer this passage, *because this passage is out of its reach.* The initiative has passed all the way to the side of the object, of things[42], of the world. The subject realises to be already behind schedule: things have become bored with meaning and dialectics, and function in another way. It realises that its identity is a form of the illusion of the world. Baudrillard quotes the poet Rilke cited in Paul Virilio's *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*: "What happens is so far ahead of what we think, of our intentions, that we can never catch up with it and never really know its true appearance'" (Rilke in Virilio, 2009, p. 29; cited by Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 198). As powerless as the lover before the loved one who has grown bored with them, the subject realises too late, when destiny is already in the arms of another:

> "Intellectual radicalism has passed into events so the intellectual has been neutralized. The intellectual has no future" (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 155).

---

[42] This seemingly echoes other theories which turn toward the initiative of objects, such as Latour's. However, the latter is a paradigm of many theories which, already in their terminologies and hyper-deconstructive form, reveal a technologically-oriented approach which is plainly subjectivist and realist. The metaphor of the "network", the idea of tracing "links", and "reassembling social connections" (Latour, 2005) are heavily infused with what Baudrillard would call a productive paradigm. This is confirmed by Latour's idea of agency, which fiercely excludes any form of initiative of the object in its seductiveness or the fatal strategies of indifference. After all, Latour was quite harsh with Baudrillard and his idea of a pataphysical suicidal initiative of the global world in attracting the planes to the Twin Towers (Latour, 2003, p. 17).

Finding another logic in this situation "is, for thought, a life-and-death question" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 73). Once again, the logic of symbolic exchange, which underlies many Baudrillard's moves, returns: if thought does not find an adequate response to this challenge thrown down by things, if it is not able to raise the stakes, it is doomed to being liquidated. At most, it will be able to reconstruct (and deconstruct) the crime in an inevitable nostalgic mode, without ever being able to act in parallel confrontation to the real. It will become a 'diminished' version of artificial intelligence and its augmented reality.

Prolonging the agony of what we feel is lost, for the impossibility of losing it once and for all, of conceiving something else, is the quality proper of our time. The postmodernist is the opposite of what Nietzsche ascribed to "posthumous people" (Nietzsche, 2005, p. 157) who, he hoped, would have known how "to die several times" even "during [their] life" (*Ibid.*, p. 128). To die during one's life means ensuring that a dead form no longer drags on, hindering its metamorphosis. If the *posthumous* can "push that which wants to fall" (cited in Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 209; originally Nietzsche, 1954, p. 209), the postmodern even drags what has already fallen, as euphemisms like 'liquid' or 'weak' signal. It echoes Baudrillard's paradigmatic figure of the "obese", who appears to "having swallowed their own dead bodies while still alive" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 53). The posthumous knows to be dead and radicalise their form, making a stake out of their disappearance. The postmodern does not see that death has already occurred and call it with the euphemisms cited.

In fact, apart from its attempts, Baudrillard notes that modernity has not been accomplished: it has not led to a new time or a new form of life. Rather, it imploded in its excesses: the excess of reality, the excess of meaning, the excess of the social, which all conflate into integral reality. The new turned out to be the illusion that sustained it, the promise it made to us, and which it kept too literally, accelerating this quest to the infinite, into the void of its tautological self-assertion. Our "nihilism", the hopeful preparation for a new time (Nietzsche, 1967b, pp. 3–4; Heidegger, 1986), was instead the revelation of the emptiness modernity was taking us to. In 1990, Baudrillard describes it as an orgy of liberation (Baudrillard, 1993c), at the end of which everyone remains a little bewildered and bored — saturated with a pleasure beyond any measure and form, plunged into the void of its tautology. Reached this saturation, someone asks the fateful question, perhaps the one that is most ours of all: 'What now?'. Here we are.

Vanishing Point: Coming to Terms with The Interminable

> "In this system, there is no longer any coming to a term. [...] We stand, then, before a paradoxical alternative: either we shall never reach the end, but or we are already beyond it" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. 60)

To characterise the present, Baudrillard often repeats the story of the man who approaches a woman and whispers in her ear: "what are you doing after the orgy?". This ambiguous question may suggest boredom and the hypothesis that there is nothing left to do but endlessly repeat the play already staged. It is one of the hypotheses put forward by Baudrillard: once the goals of modernity have been achieved — or, perhaps, its principles consumed, like a fuel — "all we can do is simulate the orgy, simulate liberation", pretending "to carry on in the same direction, accelerating" while we are actually "accelerating in a void" (Baudrillard, 1993c, p. 3; see also Pettman, 2002).

Recently, director Paolo Sorrentino staged a similar situation in his film about the exemplary figure of Berlusconi — who, better than him, embodied this pataphysical obesity, this obsession with accumulating endlessly rather than accepting the death of what has been? At the end of an 'elegant dinner'[43], a young lady sits beside Silvio at the edge of a bed. Unlike how many Italians have often mythologised him, Sorrentino confronts us with what, perhaps, occurred more often than we imagine. Silvio does not understand the coldness of the girl, who is disinterested in his offers, and asks her: "What's wrong? There is the music, the merriment, the good food". She replies: "And after that? What is planned after the music, the merriment and the good food?". It is not time for orgies anymore, but a much sadder conclusion when the girl finally finds the words to describe the problem:

> STELLA
> You have my grandfather's breath. Which is neither perfumed nor
> smelly.
> SILVIO
> And what is it?
> STELLA
> It's just the breath of an old man." (Sorrentino, 2018)

That is what seems to have happened to modernity, obsessed with remaining ever new like Silvio is obsessed with remaining ever young and attractive. One would answer Stella's question: 'and then there is nothing', 'and then there is death'. Nevertheless, Silvio, who embodies our deprivation of end in his refusal to age, remains silent and offended. He does not know how to respond.

In 2017, Roberto Calasso defined the present state of affairs as "the unnameable timely" (my literal translation, Calasso, 2020). "For we who are living at this moment, the most

---

[43] How they were euphemistically called at the time of the 'bunga bunga' scandals that involved the former Italian PM.

exact and most acute sensation is one of not knowing where we are treading from day to day" (*Ibid.*, p. 3). Similarly, we have previously mentioned Ceronetti's analysis, for which "In the vanished West and the East reduced to an appendage of the West", our historical sense corresponds to "a 33 rpm vinyl record [...] with a broken groove, that endlessly repeats, and you cannot stop it, the same, same notes" (Ceronetti, 2009, p. 74). What do these quotes tell us? Is our situation too complex to be grasped by theory? That is the first banal explanation one is tempted to give. After all, if we talk of uncertainty, it does not seem reasonable to talk of an obvious situation.

Among the thoughts that obsessed Baudrillard is a fragment defined as "tormenting" by its author, Elias Canetti. Baudrillard uses it to characterise the current state of affairs in 1983 in *Fatal Strategies* (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 149), in *The Illusion of the End* (Baudrillard, 1994b, p. 1) and continues to refer to it until the last text, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?* (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 20). One could even say that, in it, Baudrillard finds that "one idea" you are entitled to have in your life[44]; it is not casually a double-sided idea.

> "A tormenting thought: as of a certain point, history was no longer *real*. Without noticing it, all mankind suddenly left reality; everything happening since then was supposedly not true; but we supposedly didn't notice. Our task would be to find that point, and as long as we didn't have it, we would be forced to abide our present destruction" (Canetti, 1978, p. 69).

Baudrillard begins to speak here, starting from the fulfilment of modernity, which is also the fulfilment of nihilism. What to do with this world without reference, which becomes, as such, a total illusion? How do we reciprocate this world that is given to us like this, devoid of equivalents? If we fail to answer, we are condemned only to exist. This is the rule of symbolic exchange, which remains a metaphysical axiom for Baudrillard: "what is given we have to be able to give back" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 17).

Thought in Its Wild State

> "A fragment implies that it is no longer a question of finding a central point, a point of interpretation. In this book [*Cool Memories*] I get near to this simple requirement: phenomena appear, we must grasp them as they appear, hardly giving them time to begin

---

[44] "[...] you have one idea in your life, you don't have two, it's not possible" (Baudrillard, 2013, p. 133)

to make sense, then steer them immediately into the direct[ion] of their disappearance" (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 179)

Baudrillard finds in the aphorism a form of protest — of rejection in literary *and* literal form — by the world against reality. His dualistic idea is materialised linguistically in the fragmentary form in which, compared to the rigidity of discourse, thoughts return to a kind of 'wild state' in a dispersion that bears witness to how they emerge.

> "It is aphorisms that best do justice to that cerebral electricity, those myriad microscopic ideas that ascend from the nerves to the brain and are constantly passing across it" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 8).

This affinity resonates in their form. In discourse, thoughts are enclosed in a conceptual architecture that places them under "house arrest" (Baudrillard, 2010a, p. 34). In the aphorism, they remain free to appear and disappear rapidly. In the first case, concepts are forcibly realised; in the second, they are abandoned to their fate, to the phenomenal reversibility into further appearances. Herein lies the intention of Baudrillard's (not only stylistic) strategy: "ideas are phenomena like any others, and the laws of phenomena apply just as much to them", and both are to be taken without preconceptions. In the first case, "we have to take phenomena without any preconceived ideas". In the second, "we have to take ideas without any preconceived reality — neither the reality that precedes them, nor that which follows them" (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 120).

This is why the conclusions toward which thoughts are directed in a discourse are, for Baudrillard, a "house arrest". On the other hand, the aphorism can evade the forced realisation of thought, the discourse, which wants us to understand its conclusions at all costs. Tangentially, in the Latin '*capire*' ['to understand'], who is really 'captured' (both derive from '*capere*', 'to take', 'to seize')? Similarly, in the English 'under-standing', who is really 'standing beneath', *sub-jected*? The fragment does nothing of the sort. On the contrary, it is how thought tries to escape its capture — which lies in its own 'understanding'. The Baudrillardian adage returns here: "Cipher, do not to decipher. [...] Make enigmatic what is clear, render unintelligible what is only too intelligible" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 104). The aphorism has this enigmatic quality: it is "a whole art in unfurling a body of thought in such a way that one ends up passing it by without seeing it" (Baudrillard, 2010a, p. 34).

How can we conceive the compatibility of such a consideration in the current canonical theoretical universe? Indeed, there is none at all. Baudrillard has gone to great lengths to cultivate a radical incompatibility of thought with any conceptual or institutional reality that seeks to integrate it. Incidentally, this is also why it is not easy to deal with him academically. However, for the same reasons, placing Baudrillard in contrast with reality is entirely legitimate or, in fact, the proper use of his thought. This is clear if one considers that its radical antagonism is by no means abstract concerning the system it denounces. It does not live in a utopian outside, nor does it move to any figurative or literal woods (e.g. Jünger, 2013), but in the shadow, the flip side of the system itself.

What Baudrillard has in mind is not another life but what he calls, in the very opening of the first collection of aphorisms, "the rest of life" (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 3), the possibilities unextinguished by a first (real?) life.

This signals that settling for placing Baudrillard within another literary field — not on a par with 'Theory' properly so-called — would be of little use. This would still leave his writings free to scatter through the world and produce their effects. However, it would deprive us of the effects of the challenge that his fragments, if taken seriously, launch against conventional, unilaterally discursive theory. With Baudrillard, it is better to consider them as an ulterior— certainly unorthodox — possibility other than discourse but one linked to and interacting with it antagonistically. The aphorism is the shadow of discourse, the result of a *se-duction* of discourse in the literal sense: a diversion, deviation from its integral realisation.

From the perspective of the world in its illusoriness, they are a form of thought much closer to things, too. This proximity does not come from a higher truthfulness. The aphorism is, if anything, more faithful to the world insofar as it accepts its integral illusory nature — unlike the subject who legislates on the world, radical thought respects the rules of its game. If "the fundamental state of things is illusion, not reality" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 123), it is a matter of playing with different appearances and forms rather than depriving oneself of them by believing one has arrived at 'The Real'.

The discourse is not less truthful than the aphorism since it, too, is an illusory game. What distinguishes aphoristic and discursive theory is not just their formats. Instead, their peculiarity lies in how their *forms* preserve or destroy appearances. This means that an essay can be perfectly 'aphoristic' if it expresses the same singularity of a fragment and prevents its reduction to a reality. Conversely, not all 'fragments' of text are aphoristic.

The Rest of Life: The Virtual and the Fragment

> "'*Aphorizein*' (from which we get the word 'aphorism') means to retreat to such a distance that a horizon of thought is formed which never again closes on itself" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 31)

The sense Baudrillard assigns to 'aphorism' is not only that of a thought expressed briefly. Instead, the idea is to create a horizon of singularity that resists realisation. It is the transposition of the world in its illusoriness, where every detail — every form — is irreducible to an equivalent and only metamorphose into the other. In the same way, Baudrillard's writings prevent being summarised in a reductive theoretical reality or overarching concepts. As we have seen, those who did so were easily misled.

Using the same expression again, in the third *Cool Memories*, Baudrillard opens by better explaining, perhaps supplementing, the meaning of that "rest of life". He finds that, in

fact, "something else happens: another book, another woman, another desert". It was precisely an illusion: "the illusion of the end" (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 2). Nevertheless, that illusion does confer on the rest of life the gratuitousness and grace of "something extra", of "a later destiny" (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 3), precisely because that final, definitive horizon had not indeed been reached — it could not be otherwise as that horizon is unreachable. This is why, in this 'rest of life', Baudrillard finds himself writing aphoristically: the form of his thought becomes an antidote to the *definitiveness* of things.

It is curious that 'futurists' call "the singularity" the horizon when, instead, human thought is equalled by artificial intelligence (Kurzweil, 2005, 2024, upcoming)[45]. In perfect antithesis to Baudrillard, singularity is defined as that situation in which the singularity (of thought) is eliminated — another source of possible confusion. This makes us think that the idea contains something deeply dishonest or does not truly consider the singularity of thought. That thought does not abolish itself in its 'augmented' version is by no means an inevitable conclusion — as the last chapters examine, Baudrillard was indeed doubtful. At the same time, his work is a material and literal hypothesis that something irreducibly resists total extermination: this is precisely what he calls the limit of singularity (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 142), which, once more, is a form of things as they are.

The aphorisms want to depict this limit in their very form, placing themselves in perfect antithesis to the virtual. If the virtual is the idea that singularity can be approached, the aphoristic idea is that it is the unsurmountable distance between thought and its realisation. We can certainly overcome that distance, but at the price of losing the form of thought altogether.

> "Let us say, before it is too late, that artificial intelligence is incompatible with thought for the simple reason that thought is not an operation, that it is not exchangeable for anything whatever, and, most particularly, not for the objectivity of an operational calculation of the input-output type. For this reason, it cannot be taken over by any machine, or have any mechanical equivalent" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 146).

Therefore, the preoccupations with artificial intelligence absorbing thought derive from having previously renounced its singular form. Perhaps, we claim we feel artificial

---

[45] Ironically, the upcoming publication of the book, titled *The Singularity Is Nearer*, has been delayed to 2024.

intelligence because, deep down, we know we already assumed an isomorphic form of thought.

The aphoristic form protects thought from its ultimate codification into a formula:

> "There's a horizon of thought, which is pushed back as it goes along and which it must never reach. That is the very horizon, the uncrossable horizon, of singularity. This is, literally, the meaning of aphorism — *aphorizein*: the end-point, the limit of a process, be it thought or writing, that will never reach its end. By contrast, the virtual might be said rather to map out the hypochondriacal field of a thought obsessed with its own functioning, absorbing its own limits and its own horizon" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 142).

The fragment that, we note, has preceded discourse in the history of theory — think of the pre-Socratics — re-emerges precisely where thought seems to reach its final (and fatal?) point. Might it be a strategy of thought to fragment, not to be technically cloned? *And if we fear artificial intelligence, is it not because we are the ones who, before virtual reality, cloned thought and replaced it with its technical equivalent, interested only in reality? We can then hypothesise that thought might want to do away with us before we accomplish the final solution.*

The aphoristic horizon is the inverted version of the display of our devices, which coincides with the abolition of any distance between thoughts and their immediately materialised operation. Ceronetti described "all those inebriated people, bent double in front of a magic mirror, doing nothing, tracing with their finger questions that go stratified into nothingness, motionless, of which an evil cosmic power can do anything" (Ceronetti, 2017, pp. 13–14). Indeed, even before thinking of the homogeneity in the contents of that screen and the single-track thinking they promote or the physical damages they produce (Pettman, 2016, p. 119), we should probably look at the form of 'thought' imposed by the screen. We will delve into this in the following two chapters specifically. However, *we should notice immediately that these devices are the true ideological revolution which definitively and systematically implements the principle of integral reality.* Everything finds its automatic and immediate equivalent and is immediately liquidated in its singularity.

When that mirror happens (in even rarer moments) to be blank, we see ourselves reflected in it, and, perhaps for a little longer, we realise that we indeed have "an infinite spread spectrum" around us. It is not 'only' the space of offline experiences that by now can only seem helpful to us as digital material — the definition of the objectively real was "*that of which it is possible to give an equivalent* [scientific] *reproduction*", a definition which for us becomes "*that which is always already reproduced*" (Baudrillard, 1983b, p. 146). It is, above all, the last glimpse at another form of thought, which can still conceive a form irreducible to and forever distant from a technical formula.

TO HAVE DONE WITH CRITICISM:
BAUDRILLARD'S RADICAL THOUGHT

Introduction: Critical, Hypocritical

> "The whole world has become philosophical, since it has disavowed reality and the self-evident. There is no point questioning it as to its ends: it is beyond its ends. Nor as to its cause: it knows only effects. So philosophical criticism is, in substance, at an end. Cynicism, sophism, irony, distance, indifference and all the philosophical passions have passed into things. All of philosophy and poetry come back to us from places where we were no longer expecting to find them" (Baudrillard, 1996a, p. 65)

In the hegemony of ultra-reality, Baudrillard observed that the deconstructive method of critical thought becomes irrelevant. Reality's codifying and integrative power makes everything virtually reproduced in advance. Trivially, but perhaps not too much, we could point out that no thought typed into a search engine can cause it to be overturned. In the past, however, a thought could arguably overturn a system of government, and the progressive condensation of thought produced the reality we are examining.

If today's governments are overturned, the cybernetic[46] hegemony of reality is not. The irony is that any overturning of the first kind is perfectly reproduced in the virtual media, which effortlessly accepts and codifies it. Let alone if a thought, perhaps spread through a blog, can annoy the system to which, in its very form, it contributes. In short,

---

[46] Which etymologically means the art of governing the ship.

Baudrillard, who did not know social media, noted that deconstructive critical thought had become harmless or beneficial to the system. It became an aspect of the system that provided an unprecedented impression of freedom. This chapter explores the reasons for this neutralisation and how virtual reality promotes forms of automatic criticism. In the face of the sprouting of digital activist influencers or counter-information channels, we cannot avoid the question of their solidarity with the fundamental form of reality and its dogma of exterminating singularity through codification.

The chapter also deals with the response given by Baudrillard, who, as is often the case, does not attempt to defend a now irrelevant form of thought. Quite the opposite, he follows the Nietzschean maxim of pushing what wants to fall. He radicalises the irrelevance of critique and its homology with the system. If thought was integrated, there might be an ironic version of this integration — a strategy which becomes fatal for the system. In light of this, his theory takes the objectal side. It infiltrates the system assuming its same logic of escalation, daring the system to radicalise itself in turn. It brings to the field of the system and sets a trap for it. To the mortal challenge of reality, which condemns thought to irrelevance, Baudrillard sets up the mortal counterchallenge of thought.

A Work without Antidote: The Mortal Challenge of Thought

> "The problem is not to destroy the work — perhaps the work doesn't have a stake — it spins around itself until it's exhausted. The stake, I think, would be its potential for energy. It's almost like a game of poker. The stake is, in a way, a game beyond bidding in order to see other people's hands. And the stake is for other people to show their hand" (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 155)

Until today, Baudrillard's most in-depth readers lament a lack of profound consideration of his work (Latouche, 2019, pp. 11–24). Baudrillard's work was effectively received in a very polarised way, divided into blind fascination (as with the case of the Simulationists) and disregard, or even "caricature" (Pettman, 2008, p. 8). Nonetheless, even those who enter in greater depth into Baudrillard's form of thought (Gane, 1991a, 1991b; Hegarty, 2004; Leonelli, 2007; L'Yvonnet, 2013; Guillaume, 2019; Latouche, 2019) seem to share some fundamental qualities and are, in any case, somewhat sympathetic with Baudrillard's style, with some, non-essential critical attempts.

However, it was precisely on the 'critical' side that Baudrillard considered it "really quite interesting" that his work was "so virulent". He particularly enjoyed the "*hyper-reaction*" to it, which he felt was a sign of its success (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 154). Those who engaged with it seem to be caught in a dilemma without concession, a sort of symbolic exchange, where either you go to the extreme, with the risk of being trapped in its spiral, or you reject it in its entirety. This study has perhaps not avoided this either.

If we avoid the more straightforward explanations for this absence of fundamentally critical literature, we can hypothesise that the object constitutes a compelling challenge for the reader. The difficulty in considering it only to an extent, as the result of a compromise, seems to suppose that the *pensée*-Baudrillard has an impenetrable form that only admits a radical approach. In effect, we have seen that it found a way to escape a discursive, dialectical way of theorising, which would have allowed a conventional critical evaluation.

In place of a dialectical theory, Baudrillard pursues one made of irreducible, unverifiable *forms*: hypotheses, passwords, strange attractors, anagrams, aphorisms, enigmatic formulas, and forms of reversibility. These aimed to express *materially* what he considered the only antidote to the totalising reality of the global: *singularity*, *literalness*, *pure objectity*, in sum, "the radical illusoriness of the world", "the world-as-it-is" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 24). Convinced that theory "must itself be an event in the universe it describes" (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 80), Baudrillard saw "the cause of the object" as the only "difficult and obscure route" possible, the last resource:

> "To find another rule, another axiom: nothing mystical in this, [...]. But simply to delineate this other logic, unravel those other strategies, leave the field open to objective irony" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 229).

The idea of an unexchangeable gift against the hegemonic "reality of networks, of the virtual and total exchange" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 33) returns here. Impermeability to critique signals that the *forms* of Baudrillard's thought cannot be acquired only to a limited extent: their consideration implies a strategy of radicalisation equal to Baudrillard's. The horizon of its supposed reversibility lies beyond the 'critical threshold', whereas the only alternative option is abandoning its consideration.

These are the requirements for a radical thought of current reality with which Baudrillard shares a fundamental quality for opposite reasons. Whereas reality's completeness leaves us with the only option of accepting it or rejecting it entirely (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 26), Baudrillard's irreducibility is, at the same time, an openness to other directions and metamorphoses:

> "This seems to me to be the characteristic of every singularity: impregnable from outside and totally open towards the inside — initiatory" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 13)

What does not reach this requirement will fall into the farce of thought as it is absorbed by virtual 'intelligence'. Any theory devoted to describing, deconstructing and denouncing reality dialectically to improve it does not acquire this impenetrability. Without forcing a total reality to engage in a mortal challenge, it lives on as its "epiphenomenon" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 41).

Moreover, if our world long absorbed its critique, it is reality itself which '*speaks with true hardness*'. Baudrillard highlights the frequent cases where "dominant power" admits "its 'crime' in broad daylight", encapsulating its "ignominy [...] far better than any critical analysis". For instance, the Banque Nationale de Paris slogan "Your money interests me!" in the 1970s, or the admission of a French TV CEO that "What we sell to Coca-Cola is relaxed-brains time", or again the Poste Télécom slogan "Money has no sex, but it will reproduce" (*Ibid.*, pp. 37-38). To this, we could add Donald Trump, telling his staff to reduce the number of tests to reduce the number of coronavirus cases — a compendium on reality which is better than any seminar on post-truth and fake news: "by having more tests, we have more cases", Trump impeccably affirmed (Vazquez, 2020).

The world is transparent about itself, neutralising radical critiques and, simultaneously, rendering their malediction irrelevant — what Baudrillard defined as "our real malediction" (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 169). In this scenario, critique is a declination of the hegemonic jargon of transparency. The multiplicity of voices, each with its version of reality, effectively reinforces this fundamental principle. Looking at how it floods social media feeds, we could say that critique has become a '*conscious consumption choice*' which, before dreaming of saving the planet or discriminated groups, has already saved reality. Already Debord, reflecting on the integrative capacity of the society of the spectacle, underlined how those who want to express their voice must first submit to the form of the spectacle itself:

> "[...] all the books which do analyse this phenomenon, usually to deplore it, cannot but join the spectacle if they're to get attention. It is true that this spectacular critique of the spectacle, which is not only late but, even worse, seeks 'attention' on the same level, inevitably sticks to vain generalities or hypocritical regrets; just as futile as the clowns who parade their well-mannered disillusion in newspapers" (Debord, 1990, pp. 5–6)

In this sense, the malediction of unorthodox thoughts is replaced by their actual or apparent integration into the spectacle: they are turned into a discursive reality, and their singularity is exterminated. Latouche registered that even Baudrillard's work encountered "oblivion" rather than condemnation (Latouche, 2019, p. 12). He did not even consider its further ironic destiny as a protagonist of many theory-related "niche memes" (Galip, 2022).

Does this mean that Baudrillard was absorbed in the same way as critique, and if so, what radical elements of his thought remain relevant in his supposed oblivion? We will examine his distance from critique without taking the survival of his thought for granted. Nonetheless, we can anticipate that, as a *form* of thought, Baudrillard lives in an entirely different space and order of things.

Dying of Criticism: Social Distancing in Academic Sociology

> "There is no critical distance any more, there is only pure distance. And this is not engendered by any objection to means or ends, but by an effect of the destruction of causes. Pure distance results from a withdrawal of the object into radical objectivity." (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 89).

> "What has critique become when a French general, no, a marshal of critique, namely, Jean Baudrillard, claims in a published book that the Twin Towers destroyed themselves under their own weight, so to speak, undermined by the utter nihilism inherent in capitalism itself—as if the terrorist planes were pulled to suicide by the powerful attraction of this black hole of nothingness?" (Latour, 2004, n. 228)

What distinguishes Baudrillard from other kinds of 'radical' thought is its strange proximity to things, intentionally excluding any critical distance. As the long-time colleague Donzelot puts it, typically, "it is the sociologist's *distance* that enables him to be 'radical' and the *academic status* that authorizes him to criticize others" (Donzelot, 2011, p. 368). The distance the 'radical' academic sociologist (the reference is, in particular, to the Bourdieusian school) establishes "between him and society" is crucial. Only this detachment, guaranteeing (or guaranteed by?) the position assumed, procures "for him a total understanding of the social determinations from which all social agents suffer, as victims of the subjection to common sense" (*Ibid.*). Whilst they remain "blinded" by it, the 'radical' sociologist can register and denounce the problematic condition of the world. There is no other way: from this perspective, to be 'radical' means to retain a relative 'purity', namely the ability to remain untouched and uncontaminated by common sense: '*social distancing*'!

In this conviction, the 'radical' intellectual implies that the world is not as it ought to be and could be other than it is. It is *a negative position*, defined by what it denies, based upon a 'critical' distance from it (this is what the Greek *krínō* indicates: 'to discern', 'to separate', hence 'to judge'). Coherently with this negative position, "radical academicism wishes to be the lone occupant of the seat of true revolt and true criticism" (*Ibid.*), "the mouthpiece of true thought" (*Ibid.*, p. 369). In the adherence to common sense, in the affirmation of what is, it sees, in turn, the demise of the critical faculty—its catastrophe. There, the 'social distancing' of 'radical' academicism crashes into banality.

Baudrillard agrees with it literally, but he derives entirely different conclusions. Critical thought has no space in a reality collapsed on itself, devoid of negativity, positive without appeal: it can only become a useless prosthesis of that same reality. Without its distance, criticism runs dry, dying of thirst, until eventually, it devours itself (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 27). The distance Baudrillard refers to is the one which defines the perspective space of objective reality: the hypothesis of an existing "dialectic between subject and object" which puts "the subject in control" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 28).

The subject's "principle of representation" governed a comprehensive vision of the world — objective reality — that guaranteed a perspective distance between what

merely exists and its representation. On the contrary, a reality automatically reproduced annuls any critical distance, rendering the subject irrelevant and substituting both subject and object with a cybernetic network. The collapse of the principle of representation implies that reality continues to exist "physically" but disappears "metaphysically" because its principle is dead (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 18). It becomes a reality without principle, hence without either purpose or measure: a reality with the same ambiguity of an effect without a cause, unchained from any gravity.

The reality principle, which corresponded to a dual relation and not to a simple self-affirmation, self-generation of reality, is surpassed by "the technical realization of the real and its performance" (*Ibid.*, p. 19), defined by Baudrillard as "Integral Reality" (*Ibid.*, p. 18). The "fall into banality" corresponding to the catastrophe of critical academicism, the end of any "upward transcendence", has already happened, clearing the way for a "downward one". In place of the vital *tension* guaranteed by the principle of representation, all things tend to fall "into reality" (*Ibid.*, p. 25). At the end of the process, anything that is not strictly real will be equalled to nothing and liquidated.

As it happens in current wars, which are carried out from control rooms or, in any case, heavily aided by digital technologies, there is a tendency towards virtualisation and abstraction, which renders the brute violence suffered by the victims even more absurd and intolerable (Gane, 2000, p. 42). Their death even loses the last possible relief of a singular disappearance, as they become a variable in the comprehensive formula of the war operation. This applies to those who succumb to the virtual as much as those who benefit from it — e.g. those who perfect their life and body technologically, achieving their preferred virtual image. This downward transcendence of integral reality targets the victims and those who consider themselves 'the winners', as they both lose their traces of singularity. In this scenario, the only imaginable form of critique is a debate on how to configure the operations better.

The first who prefigured this scenario was Nietzsche, who announced that, after a long history, "the 'true world' finally became a fable" (Nietzsche, 2005, p. 171). Although this hypothesis has been made to sound postmodernist, the thought behind it is solid. Its vertiginous story — itself a fable? — is consumed by Nietzsche in less than a page. The hypothesis of the *true world* is the hypothesis that splits the world into the side of appearances and that of truth. The solutions to the problem of what is the true world (e.g. Platonic ideas, the Aristotelian first substance, the Christian God and so on) are not as interesting as the decline of the idea itself, which is the focus of Nietzsche's short story.

The true world moved from being "attainable" for the "wise, pious, virtuous" (Greece) to being "unattainable for now, but promised," to the same category of people (Christianity), to later becoming "unattainable, unprovable, unpromisable" but "a consolation, an obligation, an imperative" (Kant). What is essential is that critical thought lives in this distance. Therefore, once the true world is considered definitively

"unattained" and "*unknown*", the idea itself becomes useless, even as a principle, and has to be "refuted" (*Ibid.*). In this passage, Nietzsche observes the sprouting of positivism, to which we could add its later variants. Their illusion is always the same: assuming that, once it got rid of its former 'true' double, this world can still acquire a principle of truth and be known or accessed according to it. *However, the idea of truth is meaningless once the world cannot be measured against anything other than itself*—a tautology does not produce any different truth than a self-affirmation. The "invention of reality" can only be of this order: "objective laws" are nothing else than "a causal and rational simulation model" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 32), a game played entirely inside one dimension, where player and judge coincide. In this way, reality reinstates an artificial principle of measurement and exchange in a world devoid of any equivalent. Indeed, the true world's decline leaves this world uncertain and ambiguous: all we can say is simply that "the world is as it is" (*Ibid.*, p. 26).

This inevitable conclusion is way more radical, incompatible and totally beyond the partial views of criticism and postmodernism[47]. When "the true world is gone", the idea of the illusory (i.e. apparent) one loses any sense, any possibility to exist. Inevitably, "*we got rid of the illusory world along with the true one!*" (Nietzsche, 2005, p. 171). That is why, already for Nietzsche, it represents the first step toward a still unknown, unthought time. The idea that "reality has barely had time to exist and already it is disappearing" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 17) remains inconceivable. Instead, our paradigms continue to live on the ruins of what has disappeared, not considering that a *reductio ad realitatem* is impossible if there is virtually nothing left to reduce and integrate. This might be preferable and more consolatory than the prospect of the world as it is, of which "there is no possible representation" (*Ibid.*, p. 32).

Ironically, the English translation of the exact quote by Nietzsche in Baudrillard's text confirms this choice. The terms "true" (*vrai*) and "real" (*reél*) are translated both with the second term, simply "real"[48]. Apart from the confusion this creates to the reader, it is intriguing to see this as a sign: we accomplish the realisation process without noticing it, at the point that even Baudrillard has been 'real-washed'. In any case, the diagnosis

---

[47] By which I mean the relativism of any weak thought: that is, not just the denial of truth but the unjustified affirmation of untruth, post-truth and so on. After all, how can one affirm untruth without positing at least the possibility of truth, beside or beyond it? The expression derives from the homonymous book *Weak Thought* (Vattimo and Rovatti, 2013) Lotringer notices that, "In the 1980s", Baudrillard himself was accused of "weak thought" (Lotringer, 2010, p. 16)

[48] The quote becomes: "We have abolished the real world: what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? But no! with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 25).

remains correct: any form of being (in this case, the 'true') which is not immediately translated into "pure reality" (*Ibid.*, p. 26) is unthinkable.

It is for the same reason that critical thought, concerned with precisely the possibility of conceiving the different possibilities of the world (as opposed to its merely self-evident reality), is swept away. Once expurgated of any "hinterworlds", "the universe becomes a universe of fact, a universe 'as is', which no longer even has any need to be true". Neither can it attain it to move towards the ideal. All this is meaningless: the universe becomes "as factual as a ready-made" (*Ibid.* p. 25), perfectly tautological. The critical problem, that "'the world isn't what it ought to be' or 'the world isn't what it was'" (*Ibid.*, p. 26), loses every sense. Nietzsche's position: we lifted the veil of truth but discovered that "truth has no naked existence". Baudrillard's position: we dispelled the illusion of the real but found that "the real has no objective existence" (*Ibid.*, p. 25). We could add that *we abolished critical distance, but critical thought has no proximal existence*. To think this world, we must enter that dimension of literalness, which responds to automatic codification with irreducible duality and alteration.

Real and Rational in HD: The Virtual Realisation of Thought

> "Up to now, we have thought an incomplete reality, shot through with negativity; we have thought what was lacking in reality. Today, we have to think a reality which lacks nothing, individuals who potentially lack nothing and therefore can no longer dream of a dialectical sublation. Or rather, the dialectic has indeed fulfilled itself, but ironically, one might say, not at all by taking in the negative, as in the dream of critical thought, but in a total, irrevocable positivity" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 65).

> "The transposition of the universe into digital form and its availability at the touch of a finger are facts unprecedented in the history of *Homo sapiens* and affect the remotest and darkest regions of mental activity. [...] What is happening in the opening years of the third millennium can be understood only in the context of this ongoing tidal wave" (Calasso, 2020, p. 71).

Baudrillard abandons criticism, considering Nietzsche's conclusion inevitable, and radicalises its logic. The two worlds (the true and the apparent) abolish each other but do not lead to chaos or the chimaera of total freedom. They both fall into reality, into the tautological "universe of Integral Reality". The latter is indeed "neither truth nor appearance" but an "operational" domain (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 25). This means everything is technically processed, neutralised in advance, and pre-translated into its formula. No dialectics is possible since the world is already the definitive version of itself: the actualisation of its possibility is already inscribed in the infinite variability of the digital code.

Before thinking of media and devices, we must look at our mental conceptions. "'Integral Reality' has no imaginary", Baudrillard writes, indicating that the only horizon of our desires and hopes is their technical realisation, with its depressive downside of

recognising that the virtual has already absorbed them. Might this pre-realisation *in vitro* be what leaves us without a libido (see Pettman, 2021)? Beyond their neurological potential, this might explain why digital interactions anaesthetise the need for a bodily encounter and replace it all the same (e.g. the so-called sexting). The 'physical encounters' are still "at the mercy of libidinal economics" (*Ibid.*, p. 21). For the good or the bad, the various forms of codification (from the intrusion of devices into the multiple stages of sexuality to the increasingly popular sexual 'etiquettes' that influencers share on social media) suffocate the "space to breathe, time to think, and room to move and grow" needed by our "libidos" (*Ibid.*). A radical response to this situation can certainly come only from the recognition that "we are already fucked, and we have been fucked for a long time" (*Ibid.*, p. 115). However, if Baudrillard is right on the disappearance that integral reality produces, the search for a "profound carnal knowledge" Pettman speaks of (*Ibid.*, p. 116) could be problematically found. That flesh is, in fact, already infused with the principle of reality and might not believe in its 'objective' return as a body.

Perhaps we have to start from the recognition that our "libidos" are indistinguishable from that of the machine and that some horizon is only disclosed in the same direction of these violent processes — or we might leave reality where it is while consoling ourselves with a better eroticism. If it is true that only a more radical hypothesis than that of reality can abolish it, "a critical regression" becomes impossible (Baudrillard, 1994a, p. 118). Moreover, the problem is also that we cannot say if this total interface of body and technology is "good or bad". A radical singular horizon can only be found in the radicalisation of its hypotheses and the invention of rules more extreme than its — in a "hypercriticism", Baudrillard writes.

> "This mutating and commutating world of simulation and death, this violently sexed world, but one without desire, full of violated and violent bodies, as if neutralized, this chromatic world and metallic intensity, but one void of sexuality, hypertechnology without finality — is it good or bad? We will never know. It is simply fascinating, though this fascination does not imply a value judgement" (Baudrillard, 1994a, pp. 118–119)

The different options a virtual-technical reality offers are not the fruit of a struggle directed by an imaginary towards which we tend; they are the expression of a code of which we become a variant. The "unconditional liberation" depends upon the removal of the freedom "to be free" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 18). Freedom is automatic but resembles its opposite: we are condemned to be free whichever option we choose. Devices measure and transform into data potentially everything, including our non-screen time. Every potentiality is just an actual possibility that is being 'loaded': a better version of the 'performativity' sociological paradigm (e.g. Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and Savigny, 2001), contributing to the "systematic practicalization of the world" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 65).

In all domains, we observe an eradication of all which transcends this operationality. "The moral law, Kant's law, the one that was written in the starry sky and in man's inner

world, is now inscribed in the genetic code" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 37). Differences are the combinations of a pre-established code without singularity. The code is on the path to becoming the only giant singularity. This is the principle of virtualisation. As people are killed 'pre-emptively' in contemporary wars, everything is *pre-emptively realised* in the "metaphysics of the code". This is how Baudrillard defined it in 1976 in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*:

> "After the metaphysics of being and appearance, after energy and determinacy, the metaphysics of indeterminacy and the code. Cybernetic control, generation through models, differential modulation, feedback, question/answer, etc.: this is the new operational configuration (industrial simulacra being mere operations). Digitality is its metaphysical principle (Leibniz's God)[49], and DNA is its prophet" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 57).

The difference is that this 'metaphysics' denies any 'meta' dimension, so Baudrillard appropriately calls it "Integral Metaphysics" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 45). This implies that no subjective power can either implement it or stop it: the world is 'metaphysically' pre-perfected, and what one can do is be constantly upgraded to the latest version. Everyone already (virtually-really) lives as information, so the choice to participate and to what extent is only aesthetic or, in fact, cosmetic — a variation in the equally codified makeup of the planet. This is also the *de profundis* of any critique:

> "In denouncing the ghostliness of those technologies — and of the media — one implies that there is somewhere an original form of lived existence. Whereas, if the rate of reality is falling every day, this is because the medium itself has passed into life, has become the ordinary ritual of transparency. All this digital, numeric, electronic equipment is merely incidental to the deep-seated virtualization of human beings. And if this so grips the collective imagination, that is because we are already — not in some other world, but in this life itself in a state of socio-, photo- and videosynthesis" (Baudrillard, 1996b, pp. 27–28).

Baudrillard insists that it is the *concept* of virtual technologies which is "seeping everywhere into real life into homeopathic doses" (*Ibid.*), so their critique has only the result of masking the essential issue. Criticism is, for Baudrillard, the last illusion remaining after "the critique of all [other] illusions—the metaphysical, the religious and

---

[49] Leibniz invented the binary system and saw 0 and 1 as a basic expression of nothingness and being, corresponding to the idea of God's *creatio ex nihilo*.

the ideological" has been carried out. Refusing to acknowledge the disappearance of its object and to see the actual stakes, critical thinking mourns and sits up at its deathbed. "In surviving its own self, it in fact helps its object to survive" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 27). However, that object is only an ectoplasm since, in its form, it has already disappeared.

"All that is absent from itself, all that differs from itself, is not truly real" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 31): this is the new claim of reality's advertising. What can a dissident do? Open an Instagram account? Wherever we look, we only find the tempting perspective of realising our dissent somehow. At this stage, it is better to consider it already realised and invent a strategy other than the real. "We labour under the illusion that it is the real we lack the most" (the critical position), "but actually, reality is at its height" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 64).

Further contributing to reality with new solutions, debates, and ideas only helps the artificial profiling of thought — we have already critiqued and discussed everything, is the bitter consideration we must start from. The "field of tension of the real and the possible", the weapon of an "indisputably critical" theory (Adorno *et al.*, 1976, p. 69), is absorbed by the screen of integral reality. Critique is liquidated by its own realisation, as the very materialisation of its possibilities eliminates any other form:

> "On the real-time screen, by way of simple digital manipulation, all possibilities are potentially realized — which puts an end to their possibility" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 132).

Possibilities are not the limit-horizon of the real, some negative energy overturning the existent: they are contingently unrealised but *virtually actualised* possibilities. In a virtual reality, they are indisputably real. Thus, the critical attitude in the social media zoo has become one digital marketing strategy among many. The singular exceptionality of the intellect is nullified by its transformation into a coded rule, adhering to reality's 'community guidelines'. Worse than Eco believed[50], the virtual equivalence between "imbeciles" and intellectuals on social media is not just an epistemological problem of distinction. It indicates their equivalence *in rebus*, the actual result of pre-emptying any

---

[50] "On the one hand [Twitter] creates a positive phenomenon. Let's think about what happens in China, or Erdogan in Turkey […]. On the other, it gives legions of imbeciles the right to speak when they once only spoke at a bar after two or three glasses of red wine, without harming society […] now, conversely, they have the same right to speak as a Nobel Prize winner […]. One does not know whether he is speaking to the Nobel prize… Concerning the invasion of imbeciles, I believe that after a while a syndrome of skepticism is created. People will not believe in what Twitter says" (Eco, 2015, my translation).

difference by digitalisation. However, that is still a romantic-decadent vision; instead, we must investigate the equivalence of humans and machines.

In this world, the most lethal criminal endeavour is not even discriminating but equalising by force — a most radical discrimination against all singularities. In the same way, to empty the world of any sense, the best strategy is to realise all possibilities: "paradoxically, when everything's possible, and because everything's possible" it is "the end of all sovereignty, both the world's and my own" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 114). Unlike many readers have believed (e.g. Norris, 1992; Zima, 2010), Baudrillard denounces precisely the opposite of a lack of reality: "today, we have to think a reality which lacks nothing" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 65), in which real and rational have undergone their "superfusion". Hegel's slogan[51], based on the sublation [*Aufhebung*] of the two, is itself sublated [*aufgehoben*]: "the real and the rational have been overturned by their very realization" (*Ibid.*, p. 64). Maximum irony to see your dreams realised and, simultaneously, see them losing any appeal.

This is "the screen of reality itself" (Baudrillard, 2011, p. 50) which, as any other screen, does not contemplate the void, the lag, the absence, the suspension: "there is no alternative but to fill the screen" (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 139). The secret horizon of becoming and metamorphosis is liquidated by the integral variability of the code and the imperative of transparency: all metamorphoses become visible and obligatory. "We are all transsexuals [...] *symbolically*" and "we are biological mutants *in potentia*", not biologically but "*symbolically*" (Baudrillard, 1993c, p. 21). As in Hegel's reversible dictum, the accent is not simply on the virtualisation of reality but, likewise, on the automatic realisation of the virtual: *the real is immediately virtualised, and the virtual materialises itself on the screen*.

This principle allows one to project the analysis towards the future since the process is destined to continue unless a form of reversibility appears. The future assumes a different tonality and even loses its actual sense because of its pre-emptive realisation. The objection that the present perfection of this process does not exist *in actuality*, that not "all data" have been codified, not "all our acts and all events" have been already transformed "into pure information" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 25) is a weak consolation. At this stage, the remnants of the world, of life (*Ibid.*, pp. 64-65), have no possible future. Only a virtual reality or a disappearance awaits them.

---

[51] "*What is rational is real and what is real is rational*" (Hegel, 1952, p. 10, modified translation).

After all, society and its reality are not the provisional '*screenshot*' of what we see in a given moment but the "process", which can change course or even be halted. Society's "laws of movement tell more about it than whatever invariables might be deduced" (Adorno, 1970, p. 144). As Simmel writes, we must look for the "more profound valuations and currents of psychological or even metaphysical pre-conditions" which run "beneath historical materialism" (Simmel, 1978, p. 56). The destiny-destination of the process "is only legible […] in the signs of the Age" of what we can see at work already and which prefigures the coming age (Cacciari, 2018, p. 30) and establishes the conditions for conceiving a future. This is particularly valid when the 'metaphysical' principles of reality are integral. In this sense, everything has already fallen into reality: the screen is only the metaphor of its disappearance. The incident has already happened, as in the incipit of Ballard's Crash: "Vaughan died yesterday in his last car-crash" (Ballard, 1973, p. 6). The rest is the retrospective "*story of the crime*", in Baudrillard's case, "*of the murder of reality*" (Baudrillard, 1996b).

Indeed, if we look at the 'signs of the age' and take the example of life itself, we notice that its definition is a code, the DNA, and an operationalisation of that code, the genome and its expressions. Life is always already codified, essentially understood as *information*: we do not need to be cloned; "we've already exchanged transcendence for the law of the code and of DNA". This transforms us into clones "here and now" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 37): any new individual will not challenge the model of DNA. Quite the opposite, it will increase its virtual possibilities. Virtualisation (that is, integral realisation) strips life of its absolute singularity, of the irreducibility of its metamorphoses, and turns it into a set of combinations. The definition of "individual" has nothing to do with "the philosophical subject or the critical subject of history" anymore. It has become that of "a perfectly operational molecule", for which "a precoded development" substitutes the possibility of any "destiny". Because all individuals are defined in the same, neutral way of the code, they already belong to the form of "cloning" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. 68).

If all things enter their virtual horizon of cloning, this is because the world has already been cloned previously. The "High Definition" of the image, "Real Time", music at "High Fidelity", the 'augmented' sex of "pornography", thought perfected and profiled by "Artificial Intelligence", "digital languages", the body reduced to "the genetic code and the genome" are the technological consequences of 'metaphysical' cloning. This integral transformation was already *in rebus*, and, writes Baudrillard, it "marks the transition beyond any natural determination". High Definition offers technological support for the

already occurred abolition of any "referential substance"[52]. Finally, 'contents' (the opposite of Baudrillard's *forms*) are generated and operationalised according to a formula, requiring a minimum or no amount of world to function (Baudrillard, 1996b, pp. 29–30). Thinking that much of our 'activity' in the world can be foreseen by algorithms is not science fiction.

Even more decisively, our mind has become 'algorithmic' in seeing the world as a source for potential content — or, more accurately, as 'real *content*'. In this sense, 'real' or 'virtual' become only the different modalities of the code: the proper relevant form is that of the content, which is a form already 'contained' by reality. Thus, anything that has not been virtualised is not a free form of resistance but already additional data in the algorithm of reality.

The reality principle is that everything exists insofar as it is translatable into its operational formula. *Why it is so difficult for us to conceive singularity seems to be an effect of this.* The extirpation of any alterity and duality from things is also the extirpation of their danger, their potential to reverse the existent, to produce unexpected destinies. At this point, the bold statement that "the final solution" is "the resolution of the world ahead of time by the cloning of reality and the extermination of the real by its double" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 25) — that is, the passage to an integral reality without any problem of representation — appears less 'offensive'. What can seem offensive for each singularity is, instead, a common and univocal "ideal [therefore, ideological] destination": to indifferently "pass from the stage of possibility to that of reality" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 20), to be integrated uncompromisingly.

The universe of integral reality is *the ultimate operating system. One* needs to be patient: 'integral realisation in progress'. This accelerated radicalism of reality neutralises the danger of critical thought and that of the corresponding intelligentsia. By attempting to conserve what has already been surpassed by its trajectory, criticism grants the system an unforgivable advantage and surrenders to its total metaphysics. The "radicalism of its operation" devours "the radicalism of thought" by doing what critical thought aimed at the actualisation "of all the utopian potential" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 65). In this way, reality in "over-high definition" is "the achieved utopia of thought" in its pure state: having liquidated and replaced any "referential substance" with its "generalized interface" (*Ibid.*, pp. 29-32), it solves the problems of alienation. The side-effect is

---

[52] As Gane puts it, "the real 'swallows' its alienated double", the referent, "and paradoxically becomes, at the same time, transparent to itself" (Gane, 2000, p. 41). It is the passage that will allow the appearance of the technologies of the virtual.

electrocuting the singular substance of life. Criticism got its calculations wrong. Yes, we overcame alienation and dispossession, and ideals irrevocably correspond to the real. However, this paradise, perhaps like all paradises, is more disturbing than we thought.

Hypercritical, Ultra-Critical: The Radicalism of Things

> "To think extreme phenomena, thought must itself become an extreme phenomenon; it must abandon any critical pretensions, dialectical illusions, rational hope, and move, like the world, into a paradoxical phase, an ironic and paroxystic phase. It has to be more hyperreal than the real, more virtual than virtual reality. The simulacrum of thought has to move more quickly than the others. Since we can no longer multiply the negative by the negative, we have to multiply the positive by the positive" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 66).

> "There is only one possibility to save oneself from the machine. That is, to use it" (Kraus, 1912, p. 28)

What is the sense of a thought that further encodes, decodes, and furnishes another interpretation of a reality that is already complete, automatically generated and pre-interpreted? "The 'encoding/decoding' of reality was done by discourse, that is to say, by a highly complex medium, never leaving room for a head-on truth. The encoding/decoding of *our* reality is done by technology. Only what is produced by this technical effect acquires visible reality" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 92).

Reflecting the visible configurations of this reality mirrors its metaphysical architecture and does so with an unprecedented disadvantage. It is not just a planned obsolescence of thought but an immediate one that leaves reality alone in its "operational self-evidence" (*Ibid.*). Based on the veridic denunciation of what exists, reflective thought is merely a pale replica of the automatic self-reproduction of reality. "Critical distance becomes the metastasis pure and simple of the reality it is analysing, which has itself become critical by capillary action" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 91). In the same way, revolutionary thought is only a shy imitation of the actual destabilising strategies of the world, such as diseases, catastrophes, technological failures and all spontaneous "'terrorist' phenomena" (*Ibid.*, p. 81).

In sum, registering what actualises itself or, with a famous expression, "the *tracing of associations*" (Latour, 2005, p. 5) means to mirror a product of reality which is already a dead residue, the fallout of virtualisation. It amounts to a documentary on how reality makes its products and an amplification of the world's "vast self-promotion campaign" (Baudrillard, 1993c, p. 174). No 'radical' challenge, no attack at the *root* of things is implied. As sociology traces the new combinations that become visible, reality's operation proliferates. It is a bit like scrolling a social media feed without realising that it contributes to the processing power of the medium. It is the device that uses you.

How can we fool the medium of reality that, unlike actual media, does not ask us to agree with terms and conditions? What is its weak spot? The point is precisely this: if there is

one, *reality's most vulnerable point is having no vulnerable point, being unreservedly complete, devoid of ambivalence*: "this unconditional realization of the world, which is at the same time its unconditional simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 65). This is the key challenge (and conquest) of Baudrillard's thinking: to assume reality in its extremeness unconditionally, at all costs, as a "*fait accompli*". If we have always conceived "an incomplete reality" and "thought what was lacking in reality", today we are faced with "a reality which lacks nothing, individuals who potentially lack nothing" and are, we could say, 'virtually realised alive'.

It is the ironical realisation of the dialectic. Instead of taking away the negative while preserving it in a higher synthesis, ultra-reality liquidates it: "a pure and simple de-negation". The realisation of dialectic "in the parodic mode of its elimination, by the ethnic cleansing of the concept" is the destiny of both the world and individuals (*Ibid.*).

The escalation of these expressions and the use of the terms 'denialism' and 'negationism' in the way they are used, for example, concerning the Holocaust, becomes more explicit. In the last years, Baudrillard writes: "The virtual, in its project of liquidating the real *technically*, is truly negationist" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 32). He also argues: "The profoundly negationist character of information, the demand for which has no concern for any historical reality or any moral meaning. Shoah or no Shoah, if Hitler were alive he would be on all the screens" (*Ibid.*, p. 26). This use is far from being a mere provocation. It has, in fact, a precise function: that of denouncing the totalitarianism of a reality which does not admit being questioned while presenting itself as offering every possibility, every form of desire and fulfilment. The truth is that the 'freedom' it produces, the freedom to consume its virtually limitless options, is paid at a high price.

Radically contesting it is unacceptable since the idea that 'this reality is all that is' is a form of belief that excludes many other dimensions (the symbolic, the literal) in favour of the strictly technical real. During the pandemic emergency, the importance of *believing* in science and *trusting* the experts was often repeated. However, what does this terminology tell us beyond the obviousness that scientists can deal with reality better than social media conspiracy gurus? What need would there be to believe in reality if it was all that is?

> "Say: This is real, the world is real, the real exists (I have met it) – no one laughs. Say: This is a simulacrum, you are merely a simulacrum, this war is a simulacrum – everyone bursts out laughing" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 95).

Reality is presented as the most basic and incontestable *rule*: it must not be overturned. Nietzsche put this very well when he claimed that regardless of its original "almost always wrong and arbitrary character", the ingrained belief in how things are "gradually grows to be part of the thing and turn into its very body". The arbitrary configuration becomes the natural essence of the thing and does not require any demonstration other than its self-affirmation: it is the thing. Hence, he concludes: "How foolish it would be to

suppose that one only needs to point out this origin and this misty shroud of delusion in order to destroy the world that counts for real, so-called '*reality*'" (Nietzsche, 1974, pp. 121–122).

In line with this, Baudrillard describes "belief" as "an absurd concept"; one of the "facile tautologies" behind which other "stakes and challenges" hide (Baudrillard, 1990c, p. 142). This is why the possibility of challenging reality attracts trouble at the moral level[53]: it is effectively taken as a duel. "Any questioning of reality, of its obviousness and its principle, is deemed unacceptable and condemned as negationist [i.e. the term used for Holocaust deniers]" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 22). The automatic *pensée unique* that reality is the exclusive horizon, the only dimension of things, who disputes reality is considered a denialist of things themselves. Instead, we have seen which fundamental dimensions of things reality liquidates to exist. Thus, is not this the "truly negationist" stance, as it eliminates the singular forms of the world — of which it is ironically part — in favour of only one (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 32)? Or is its self-affirmation still part of the strategies of the world, as the late Baudrillard will hypothesise?

This realist ultimatum is undoubtedly an excellent, *sui generis* symbolic tactic to disqualify and liquidate the adversary. This has been occurring not just to the confused minds of the anti-vax subculture but indiscriminately to those who contest the real (effectively real!) explanation of the recent pandemic as being a partial one. Agamben has rightfully underlined the use of "infamous terms" such as "denier" to discredit those who do not accept the only admitted version (Agamben, 2021d). Compared with Agamben, Baudrillard did not intend to defend the 'right meaning' of these words and bring reality back to a veridical configuration. Quite the contrary, he accepted the challenge. There is no point in fighting the absolutism of reality with theoretical moderation because the idea that reality is everything is a form of tautological delusion. "That which is real exists; that is all we can say" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 18).

And if 'denying reality' sounded like a contradiction in terms, a delusional standpoint, this is precisely how Baudrillard's thought increasingly developed. If the world itself "is on a delusional course", a 'hypochondriac' thought, obsessed with 'hygienically' removing ambiguities and restoring certainty, falls into the technical cleansing of virtual codification. Once more, the problem of being an option in a system of limitless

---

[53] Which he probably enjoyed to an extent, since he provoked that precise reaction several times, with the publication of *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995; commented on by Norris, 1992) and *Requiem for the Twin Towers* (Baudrillard, 2003c; commented on by Latour, 2004, p. 228) for instance.

combinations presents itself. An even more "delusional standpoint" towards it is the counter-gift this world deserves (Baudrillard, 1993c, p. 1).

Here, we hear Bataille's echo: "Philosophy's last word is the domain of those who, *wisely*, lose their heads. This vertiginous fall is not death, but *satisfaction*" (Bataille, 2001, p. 218). The satisfaction of reality, the saturation of the world, "the achievement of all possibilities, of all technologies and all desires", and the fact that all of this "is unbearable, is impossible" is the starting point of radical thought (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 191). The strategy is to recreate a duality, "to restore a dual situation" (*Ibid.*) by 'stealing' the essential traits of reality—*simulating* them, we could say—to spit them back at a higher degree of violence. It is in this sense that "The simulacrum of thought has to move more quickly than the others" in order "to multiply the positive by the positive" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 66). Excess by excess: Baudrillard is considering that we can save thought only by fully assuming the extremeness of the situation, of all the devices at work on the unconditional realisation of the world. Virtuality is an excellent resource if turned into a radical principle: perhaps technologies, objects, and even our bodies do not believe in reality but in the destiny of the world that takes shape in them…

The virtual realisation of thought does not leave one simply in an a-critical time: the hypercritical capacity has been absorbed by the world, dispersed into things. Once "all critical thinking has disappeared, radicalism passes into things" (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 69). It can now be found in the extreme phenomena produced by integral reality. In 1912, Karl Kraus wrote: "There is only one possibility to save oneself from the machine. That is, to use it" (Kraus, 1912, p. 28). Whether we refer to technologies, objects, viruses or the automatisms of our own bodies, we must not only comprehend the inhuman but figure out how to extract a literal thought from it. The idea of critiquing current extreme phenomena means not understating their nature beyond the logic of objectivity and causality (think of the pandemic or the Ukraine war and the surreal debates about them), representation (think of Brexit and Trump and the poverty of political analysis), sociality and anthropology (think of the lockdown and the relative acceptance to become terminals).

The source of radicalism does not lie in the critical distance anymore but in an accentuated proximity which aims to reverse reality in its principles and alter our concepts according to it. Thought and the supposed singularity of the event can hope to survive only in its extreme phenomenology. Baudrillard calls this literal theory "hypercritical or ultra-critical thought — much more critical than critical thought" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 9). The difference between the two is that conventionally critical thought is interested in establishing causes and measuring their relations to effects. On the contrary, radical thought aims to read something literal in the "delirium of forms and appearances. […] the pure, nonreferential connection of things and events" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 192), where it hopes to find the coin of reversibility.

TILL LIFE DO US PART:
INTERMINABILITY AND DEATH

Introduction: The Interminable Interface and Its Antibodies

> "The condition in which we live is the true end of the world: the chronic one" (Kraus, 1918, p. 204)

This chapter is conceived as a literal phenomenology of integral reality (or ultra-reality) and its antibodies. Baudrillard argues that the more a system perfects itself and assumes a totalitarian form, the more it secretes the germs of its own destruction. If we can define this reality as 'extreme', we should find an equally extreme antagonism within it. At the same time, since this reality presents itself as virtually everything, if there appears to be nothing outside of it, antagonisms will appear inside it.

As with the fourth chapter, I have tried to echo Baudrillard's idea that phenomenology must be somehow 'wild', unfiltered. Indeed, the point is to emphasise the direct impact with the object so that that object might reverberate in thought and writing. The object that appeared to me most immediately was interminability. If our society and history have no final horizon towards which they tend, our life appears to reflect that same form. The unlimited availability of information, uninterrupted and on-demand entertainment and the extension of life thanks to medical technology: everything seems to produce the illusion of an interminable horizon, of a virtually endless existence.

At the same time, however, this horizon has an unprecedented capacity to absorb us to the point of neutralising our thinking and doing. The total interface between the body and the devices also abolishes the distance between human beings and their technological instruments. Adding the remote technologisation of many jobs and the

omnipresence of devices in leisure time, we realise that we could spend our entire lives in this interminable "electronic interaction" (Baudrillard, 2002).

However, all this discourse revolves around a considerable repressed element: death. This illusory interminability of life does not remove its final termination. On the contrary, refusing to conceive it renders death entirely senseless: one dies just as a sudden network blackout occurs. From the image of the blank screen (the exhaustion of both devices and us), the chapter asks what can interrupt this process.

In the interminable, we lose the form of otherness. "No more 'other' facing you" (*Ibid.*): we become a single interface with devices and integral reality. Similarly, in life that is only life, we lose the form of death, the thought of death. However, the body and the world are not yet fully technologically purified in the act. Forms of allergy, rejection and rebellion emerge. If reality is totalised, they will not be political forms but rather trans-political: antagonisms to the very form of reality. In this horizon, psychopathologies also become forms of involuntary denial produced by the body wired to the apparatus. Likewise, heterodox forms of thought arise where discourse and dialectical critique become integral to reality's system. From the perspective of integral reality, these are terroristic forms. All the more so because they are not subjective and intentional but constitute automatic reactions. They are as unpredictable as a terrorist act. The chapter reviews some of them, showing how they reintroduce singularity and otherness into a world prey to global homogenisation.

Left to Our Own Devices: Interminability and Exhaustion

> "Our natural state is the exhaustion state" (Bernhard, 1973, p. 21)

> "Perfect adaptation to contemporary urban life is a sign of serious imbalance. Only those who suffer from city life are healthy. The signs of imbalance that result from conscious suffering and incompatibility are proof of sound mental health" (Ceronetti, 1993, p. 68)

Conceptually, psychically and physically, exhaustion is a conspicuous object this study often found. Faced with the threatened exhaustion of all physical and metaphysical resources, the deposits of interminability are disproportionate. It would seem to be a failure of theoretical energies, yet the material consulted for this research both anticipated and confirmed this seemingly individual event. Of course, one objection would seem legitimate: Fichte was certainly not wrong when he stated, surprisingly for a systematic idealist like him, that everyone has the philosophy that suits their personality (Fichte, 1994, p. 20; reiterated by Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 20e). Even Baudrillard agreed that, in a sense, "concepts and figures of analysis" are "purely and simply the metaphysical expression of a set of character traits" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 86).

At the same time, it was he who affirmed what looks like a proper theorem of knowledge:

> "In fact, speaking of something and being part of it are two quite different things. The finest example is death: you have to be alive to talk about it. But this is true of anything — of politics, economics, art. You have to be a stranger to something to speak about it in a strange — that is to say, original — way. You have to be a man to speak of the feminine. All those who speak from 'experience' speak in a conventional way — they relate their life stories. In fact, you have absolutely to collude in what you are speaking about and at the same time to be somewhere else altogether. You have to love it and hate it. You have to be the thing you speak of and to be violently against it. This is the law of hospitality, and it is the law of hostility" (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 47).

We cannot be so naive as to deny this, but this hypothesis can be radicalised. Otherwise, what is the importance of recounting your life? Nevertheless, if thought is affected by a Nietzschean "*chemistry of concepts and sensations*" (Nietzsche, 1986, p. 12), it may be affected, along with personality itself, by a more general 'chemistry'. That is not true in absolute terms, but it is undoubtedly a valid hypothesis in that social-metaphysical regime that Baudrillard calls "Integral Reality" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 17). Moreover, suppose the ruins of our societies — perhaps an obsolete concept — suffer from those same symptoms. In that case, it seems interesting to establish a comparison and imagine a short circuit between them and individuality.

Is it possible to defend the idea that personality detects something autonomous from the social apparatus or even, dare we say it, from the entire apparatus of reality? Which individuality can be deemed free from the interminability of this potentially irreversible process? Adorno, from whom Baudrillard draws more than one suggestion, asserted peremptorily that the apparent individualism of our societies is only an ideological disguise for the fact that the individual is already a product of society itself: "in an individualistic society, the general not only realizes itself through the interplay of particulars, but society is essentially the substance of the individual" (Adorno, 1974, p. 17). Its apparent autonomy is the autonomy of one of the infinite configurations of a series, a variation of the same code. What the individual is indivisible from is the total apparatus of reality: "The individual has no originality — it is a particular molecular fragment of an ensemble, and when you are in this system you are not a subject anymore, you can be individual as an abstract configuration, but you are a pure operation, deducted from the functioning of a system" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 157).

Terminal-individual: how could we otherwise explain the cheerful and carefree transfusion of all that is most intimate in our lives onto screens (Agamben, 2016, p. xxi) that we share with everyone and, in turn, consume ourselves, especially(!) in our most private intimacy. All this would appear supremely violent to us if our cerebral cortex did not now coincide with the screen's frame. However, those operations are "without

distinction, operations of brain and screen — the mental operations of a brain that has itself become a screen" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 78). In this sense, the apparent technological determinism would be, in fact, a case of *'metaphysical isomorphism'*: individuals have grown so similar to the apparatus of reality in which they live that they 'spontaneously' identify with it. That is why, as Adorno concluded, we can learn a lot about "the general" from "individual experience" (Adorno, 1974, p. 17).

More than a century ago, Musil noted that "if we attempt to subtract from ourselves those conventions conditioned by our time, what remains is something completely unshaped" (Musil, 1990, p. 165). When individuality becomes a terminal in the circuit of integral reality, our "qualities" seem to stop possessing a centre of gravity (Musil, 1995a, 1995b) and appear to become somewhat external phenomena. What we observe in 'personal' media is the "compulsory extraversion of all interiority", which reveals once more "a forced irruption of all exteriority" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 94). Baudrillard joked that "only doors [in French, 'vessels'] communicate" (Baudrillard, 1996a, p. 80). Nonetheless, we could say that these 'communicating vessels' are both the cause and the effect of 'communication'. The latter neutralises the dangerous irreducibility which Nietzsche attributed to the "*individuum*" (Nietzsche, 1997a, p. 105). To constitute a danger to the system, being individual (indivisible) is no longer enough.

On the contrary, individualism is the most extreme form of reification. The ecosystem of individual life is saturated with devices which not only probe it to the depths of body and soul but even offer all the answers before any question. As in the visionary *The Man Without Qualities* (Musil, 1995a, 1995b), the in-dividual, indivisible centre is endlessly subdivided, literally *left to its own devices* ('device' is based on the Latin for 'divided'). The pulverised individual turns out to be only a shapeless shadow. Sociality, now in noticeable recession even by law (as in the lockdowns), obliged us for some moments to ignore devices, except when they actively demand our attention. However, these moments are now exceptions and the merciless statistics on our screen times can only capture the symptoms, not the metaphysical overbearingness of this revolution. "This revolution is not economic or political. It is an anthropological and metaphysical one. And it is the final revolution—there is nothing beyond it. In a way, it is the end of history [...] as the beginning of a world without humans" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 80). The formula of the "man without qualities" concealed, according to Musil himself, that of the "qualities without man" (Musil, 1995a, pp. 156–159).

Thus, as if the age-old process of socialisation and rationalisation had not been enough, "the subject's divestment of sovereignty turns it even more into a reflexive form of its object" (Adorno, 1973, p. 42). Theory cannot escape this view if it seeks its object. In the violence of this contagious transfusion of the 'social' and intimate life, transparent to one another, theory finds its lucidity. Ignoring these phenomena or considering them accidents of an, after all, 'good' social substance would turn it into ideology. On the contrary, it is necessary to let the object emanate all its sinister light and vehemence to find the radical consequences of this reality and, if anything, hypothetical points of

rupture. Let us follow Baudrillard's advice, for whom "there is no liberation but this one: in the deepening of negative conditions" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 223).

The illnesses of the individual become the first feeling of the other, the first and most violent 'social' passions and the sign of the disappearance of the social function at the time it is maximally realised. Our 'mental illnesses' show with certainty that life is unbearable in its social integration. On the other hand, they are the first cipher of the other, the sign that there might be an alterity at which we can aim: in short, the sign that we might not be completely 'idiotic'[54], that there might still be a relationship, play, challenge, seduction. Only the insane might be lucid — or, at least, more innocent than certain 'new normal', as Agamben suggests in a comparison between the reclusion of the mentally ill Hölderlin and our lockdown (Agamben, 2021c, p. 223).

Our identification is such that we can no longer play the alienation card.

> "There is no separation any longer, no emptiness, no absence: you enter the screen and the visual image unimpeded. You enter life itself as though walking on to a screen. You slip on your own life like a data suit".
> (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 75).

The virtual screen is one; it coincides with reality, and everything suits it: we know that even the most outlandish fantasies, or the fiercest satires on the system, are ideally suited to being *'contained'* (even the Islamic State uses Twitter!). Soft containment, through software, is much more subtle and effective than totalitarian restraint, which generates resistance and awareness of oppression. In this, one could even envision an overcoming of the dialectic between "repression" and "seduction" that Bauman suggested as a new, 'softer', paradigm of control (Bauman, 1992, pp. 98–99). Indeed, the possibility to share everything, really everything, in the fluidity of feeds feels already inebriating in itself: the operation is so smooth that the old ruins of 'the real' appear to us almost already in 'post' format. Filters are useless. Our perceptual structures are now more suited to the frozen-cold movement on the screen than the 'warm ones' of the world. So, we cannot feel barriers: image and screen induce "a kind of immersion, a sort of umbilical relation, of 'tactile' interaction, as McLuhan used to say. You enter the fluid substance of the image, possibly to modify it, in the same way as science infiltrates itself into the genome and into the genetic code to transform the body itself" (Baudrillard,

---

[54] In the Greek etymology, *idiṓtēs* means the self-referential 'private citizen'. Jean-Luc Nancy relates "idiocy in the sense of the Greek *idiotes*, meaning private or ignorant person" to as "idiocy in the modern sense of stupid impenetrability ('private property' as deprived of meaning)" (Nancy, 2000, p. 45).

2005b, p. 76). Perhaps we are no longer made of the substance of dreams but of that of images, or maybe it is the images that altogether dream us.

In this scenario, the best 'critic' is only a content curator—as we say today with some involuntary contempt, a 'content creator'. And what can content do? Will it succeed in interrupting the endless chain, the seriality of the screens or, by contributing to it, will it further reinforce the *containing* form of this apparatus? For all its undoubted power and residual appeal, it is the critics themselves, even academics, who give themselves over to the integral spectacle — no doubt this prevents us from reading much second-rate material. However, beware: one should not spare oneself but allow nausea to develop for blogs, virtual reading groups, remote learning and webinars. We can hope to abort this interminability only by aggravating and radicalising the "negative conditions" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 223).

> "In the end, it is the strangeness of the world that is fundamental and it is that strangeness which resists the status of objective reality. Similarly, it is our strangeness to ourselves that is fundamental and resists the status of subject. It is not a matter of resisting alienation, but of resisting the very status of subject" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 36).

Instead of resisting it, we recognise ourselves in the obese and obscene figure of Father Ubu, the Trumpian character of Jarry's Pataphysics (Jarry, 2011) — pataphysics remains, for Baudrillard, "the only known attempt at the passage to Integral Metaphysics" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 45). In this deformed figure, we recognise the greed of our screen (of the screen that we are) to virtual-realise everything: let us think of the phenomenal world as "definitively as an illusion" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 45) instead of consoling ourselves with the sermon of moderation. The important thing is not to use technology in a good or bad way, but to use it *too little or too much*, to exaggerate enough to become 'deliriously lucid'. Only in this way can we find a hole in the world's tyre. Only in this way do we discover where the limit lies, or rather its absence, which is a much worse and insidious limit. Here are two enigmatic formulas from the young and the old Baudrillard:

> "The principle is to exaggerate: that is how to destroy reality" (Baudrillard, 2005a, p. 213).

> "The gravitational collapse of every system, of every process, of every body in movement, whose acceleration creates a reciprocal shock wave, an antagonistic force not just equal but greater, which constitutes its absolute limit, its negative horizon, and beyond which it cancels itself out. Too much is too much" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 193).

However, it is still not too much: that is the problem. As Baudrillard suspected two years later, the system's progress could be irreversible, interminable. That is why the only hope of reversibility consists in conceiving in-terminability itself as exhaustion. It is a

play on words, but it is often words, "passwords", that teach us "unforeseen channels" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. 3). As we read in *Symbolic Exchange*, if we recognise that reality itself is only the effect of a disjunction of terms[55], language and thought become incendiary operators. In their ironic games, the world is turned upside down, everything changes sign, and it is immanently revolutionised. Only this playfulness remains against the total metaphysics of the code, against the integral screen of reality. The more banality extends, the more it ridiculously intensifies, and the more it is possible to discern its secret irony.

In the orgy of images, the intensive farming of reality, and the homoeopathic transparency of the social, we receive the grace of a new "principle of evil" (Baudrillard, 1990b, pp. 219–230). Consciousness was effectively destined to eliminate any limit by identifying itself with it until it reached the bottom—which coincides with its nothingness, with recognising itself as a simulacrum, redundant and useless. Here, in this nihilistic destination, the inevitable deliriums, depersonalisation and melancholy come to our help. They are not the escape route which does not exist but, quite the opposite, the resource to effectively reach the bottom and live "through the whole of" our "nihilism" (Nietzsche, 1967b, p. 3). Nietzsche used to say that "one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star" (1954, p. 17); we more humbly say that *one must undergo the chaos of the self even to stay alive.* Maybe Nietzsche was great and lucid, especially during his fall, as Bataille hypothesised in *Beyond Seriousness*: "his happiness was reduced to not having let the unhappiness within him speak" (Bataille, 2001, p. 218). We might find *lucidity* and *clarity* if we can think without the weight of seriousness, not letting our misfortunes devour our thought while traversing them entirely.

We have our illnesses, but they are not our possessions; they are not ours. In them, "I is another" (Rimbaud, 2005). Even if we wanted to, what we live cannot be ours. In any case, it will never be *merely* ours: in these phenomena, we touch on the tragicomedy of Integral Reality. Burnout, depression, mania: they innervate society as reflections of its disappearance, corresponding with our metamorphosis. We can only start from our extraneousness to ourselves: *the interminable is exhausted.*

---

[55] "Even the *reality* of life itself derives solely from the disjunction of life and death. The *effect of the real* is only ever therefore the structural effect of the disjunction between two terms, and our famous reality principle, with its normative and repressive implications, is only a generalisation of this disjunctive code to all levels" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 133)

Blank Screen: Interrupting the Interminable

> "The screen reflects nothing. It is as though you are behind a two-way mirror: you see the world, but it doesn't see you, it doesn't look at you. Now, you only see things if they are looking at you. The screen screens out any dual relation (any possibility of 'response')" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 78).

> "Look at the blank screen. What is it hiding from us?" (DeLillo, 2020, p. 28)

Baudrillard speaks of our society in terms of extermination and extenuation. By extermination, he does not indicate the physical one, a punctual event which has affected the human being (from Auschwitz to Hiroshima) or which might await it (the extinction of the species). Instead, he means the symbolic one described by the literal sense of the word *ex-termination*, that is, having no term, having no end, being deprived of the end, ex-terminated (Baudrillard, 2003b, pp. 59–68): condemned to *the interminable.*

This interminability reverberates in the potentially endless entertainment of our platforms. Paradoxically, things happen if we do nothing and are only interrupted if we do something. 'Auto-mixed' songs, videos and images in endless sequence, following one another as if by magic. They almost seem powered by our passive energy. Similarly, on the same side of the screen, thoughts follow one another in the figurative form of the word processor. Baudrillard once said that "on a screen", he could see "nothing except an image" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 127), so word processing would be another form of image-entertainment rather than writing, so far as words immediately appear in 'iconic' form—precisely as images. Ceronetti, too, thought that, by now, "[…] that of the writer is also a 'technological profession'" (Ceronetti, 2009, p. 79).

There is no more silence and absence: "the space of the screen, of virtual reality, is the space of the abolition of night" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 120). The permanent day of virtual reality imposes that "the screen must always be filled" and "the void is not permitted". It means entering "into an indefinite series, the seriality of things", where "the imperative is not to stop". To the point that "we are somewhat screens ourselves now, transformed into reflecting screen" (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 148). Baudrillard, who was here referring to the TV, also captured what would have happened later when individuals became "the material on which […] algorithms are applied" (Calasso, 2020, p. 72), further confirming this idea. Not casually, the Netflix CEO Reed Hastings candidly declared:

> "You know, think about it, when you watch a show from Netflix and you get addicted to it, you stay up late at night. We're competing with sleep, on the margin. And so, it's a very large pool of time" (Hern, 2017).

If sleep used to be "the only remaining barrier, the only enduring 'natural condition' that capitalism cannot eliminate" (Crary, 2013, p. 74), the spirit of our entertainment platforms is as integral as that of reality. The widespread use of wearables that are never switched off and monitor the sleeper's data indicates that the 'interaction' with devices already overcame the sleep/wake dichotomy, as much as that between the healthy and the ill body. For a life undistinguishably intimate and professional, it is difficult to dispute Ceronetti's pessimistic remark on the effective outcomes of civilisation:

> "In the Utopias, attempts were often made to escape from the dungeons of civilisation, none of which ended well. Today, the only conceivable horizon is unlimited slavery" (Ceronetti, 2009, p. 92).

The problem is that the appearance of thinking and writing requires a suspension of this closed-circuit interaction and is incompatible with an interminable process. It can never coincide with a mere extraction of data, even if those data were our ideas. Thought "must be suspended, deferred […], or else it's not thinking at all. [..] thinking and writing in a strict sense cannot happen in real time" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 128). In the interminability of real-time, instead of the distance between the brain and the written form, we experience an uninterrupted transfusion of thoughts, a short circuit that Baudrillard considered disastrous. In the 1994 Q&A just quoted, he admits having a specific allergy to the use of computers: "But my repulsion for computer — not repulsion [*laughs*], my indifference — I cannot, I simply cannot operate with them technically, I cannot [*audience laughter*]. […]. But it's no moral or ideological refusal of computers [*laughs*]" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 128).

The problem may reside in the short-circuit created by the real-time appearance of writing, which has no time to materialise gradually, to emerge as it happens on a typewriter [56]. In doing so, it steals that suspension between the thought and its materialisation, which, for Baudrillard, seems to be the actual moment of thinking. Indeed, as the chair asks to clarify whether a bad typist would make the "*the deferment*" possible, Baudrillard, misunderstanding the question, reveals that it is partially a question of speed. Since he is not "a perfect typist", he explains, "I have time... I have time to manage with thinking and so on" (*Ibid.*). Language and thought are literally *interruptors*[57], functions that interrupt. They suspend the electric automatism of action.

---

[56] As his wife Marine recalls, Baudrillard always used that machine and never a computer (Fagioli and De Conciliis, 2018)

[57] I refer to electrical interruptors.

Those with no articulated language, such as animals, cannot think in this specific sense. Those with automatic language, like computers, cannot think either.

The problem with ever-smoother devices is not overcome, and it comprises being a better or worse typist less and less. Soon, that might disappear too: "the coming society, computerized and illiterate, will also be a society without writing. It is our future primitive society" (Baudrillard, 2003a, p. 65). The new technological developments seem to confirm it — even this thesis was partially dictated, but that is still a relatively rudimental technology.

In this interminability, the uncomfortable antidote of death emerges shyly, almost embarrassedly. It is a guest who has felt obliged to accept an invitation but would gladly refrain from visiting us. It is as if death, too, was afraid to interrupt the endless entertainment and procession of sounds, images and nerve impulses. The arrogance of our spectacular apparatus toward it must have frightened death when, over the last two years, we received news of a loved one who had disappeared in the isolated solitude of a hospital complex. Nothing was to silence our virtual equipment: not even lorries of coffins parading through the streets or images bordering on pornography from intensive care units. Even stuck in hell, we have to lend ourselves as walk-ons and retransmit (while enjoying it) the spectacle.

The recent Don DeLillo's *The Silence* deals with a sudden interruption of this spectacle. One struggles to grasp the meaning of that abrupt blackout of all screens, all devices and all services during the (luminescent) night of the Super Bowl. DeLillo does not explain it. Is it a gratuitous story? After all, in our minds, the idea of the end of all transmissions has become just a casual, senseless, contingent incident comparable to a death:

> "We live, then we die, and that is truly the end" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. 18)

The difference is that we assume the blackout will be fixed soon. In effect, many have found *The Silence* a meagre and insignificant novel. However, one can see why: *our only 'sense', our only destination, our only (lack of) destiny, is the equally senseless succession of figures on the screens.* Anything different from that is literally not entertaining.

That is why *The Silence* becomes relevant. Not only does it not indulge in any spectacularism, recounting a rather bare chronicle of the events and the characters' gestures. More crucially, it shows the earth thrown into darkness, which *is the very unplugging of the spectacle.* Even in its form, the novel does not end in a proper sense: it is, instead, interrupted abruptly in the image of the (material and mental) blank screen:

> "Max is not listening. He understands nothing. He sits in front of the TV
> set with his hands folded behind his neck, elbow jutting.
> Then he stares into the blank screen" (DeLillo, 2020, p. 116).

129

It is death, or the death within us, finally pulling the plug on us as we find ourselves in the throes of intensive interactivity. The novel is not just about the termination of interactivity; it is, at the same time, a terminated novel.

Theses can end in that interminable as well — interminably 'not ending'. In conceiving a theory of society, the writer must defend themselves from the interminability of the screens and the non-events they relentlessly provide for our consumption. The difficulty in detecting and 'pinning down' the essential in the endless loop of 'what's up' is the highest. In the stream of information, things follow one another without critical moments, turns or leaps: the format imposes no absence but complete visibility. Once more, the interminable.

The contagion of this endlessness also hits at the core of our writing practices, and there is a further reason why things become interminable. Reading Baudrillard's *America*, academics find themselves portrayed by these merciless words, describing the obsession of interactivity, of being "hooked", in this case, into the spectacle of "your own brain":

> "What people are contemplating on their word-processor screens is the operation of their own brains. It is not entrails that we try to interpret these days, nor even hearts or facial expressions; it is, quite simply, the brain. [...] All that fascinates us is the *spectacle* of the brain and its workings. What we are wanting here is to see our thoughts unfolding before us — and this itself is a superstition. Hence, the academic grappling with his computer, ceaselessly correcting, reworking, and complexifying, turning the exercise into a kind of interminable psychoanalysis, memorizing everything in an effort to escape the final outcome, to delay the day of reckoning of death, and that other — fatal — moment of reckoning that is writing, by forming an endless feed-back loop with the machine" (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 36).

These words need no comments. Indeed, they capture the virtual interminability of the exercise with clinical *literalness* (and better than the psychotherapies devised to get out of it). A literalness I found transfigured in a random image taken on a day in late November 2020.

In the "Alpine landscape", which Baudrillard described as "theatrical" (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 73), the end of autumn is the height of luminous and chromatic intensity. A cruel, terse clarity reappears after the explosive hangover of summer. The studio-living room-kitchen from which I type looks out through large south-facing windows onto a vast natural amphitheatre with peaks of over 3000 metres. The autumn sun comes straight into your face. That morning, I saw myself behind mirrored sunglasses, reflected in the blank screen. I captured that image from the screen of my phone in endless feedback. It was the screen capturing me as I tried to tame it.

That is the image of *sfinitezza* [weariness, exhaustion], which in Italian is the result of 'finishing oneself', obsessing oneself with the end [*fine*] that never comes. It was necessary to interrupt this lethal interactivity, this endless psychoanalysis. "Everything begins with an interruption", writes Valery (1970, p. 489). However, how can it be done?

That is another iteration of the theme of this project, which, put in theoretical terms, becomes the possibility of *the reversion of our irreversible processes*: progress, globalisation and virtualisation, which promise us this interminability in which we lose, as happened to our projects, the possibility of putting ourselves into play, of playing with our singularity. Until the measure is exceeded, and the puffball-brain deflates along with reality. "The pataphysic mind is the nail in the tire — the world, a puffball": reality is destroyed by exaggeration (Baudrillard, 2005a, p. 213). In its deflation, the spirit-breath of the world reappears.

The Artificial Paradises of Immortality: A Reactionary Dream

> "To integrate the end into the process: the only way of escaping mourning. To enjoy the end as a mirror magnifying the pleasure. One may even, in this sense, envisage integrating death as a magical factor" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 7)

Baudrillard's work seems to end enigmatically, certainly without resolution, without a redemptive end. It is terminated in the denunciation of interminability. "The end itself has disappeared ..." are probably the last printed words, dated "*January 2007*" (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 70), two months before his death from cancer. It is easy to see this as an ironic sign (Latouche, 2019, p. 64) since, effectively, Baudrillard defined cancer as the paradigmatic contemporary pathology, the pathology of "aggravated redundancy" which begins "with industrial objects" and ends "in the organization of cells" (Baudrillard, 1993c, p. 137). But if dying, as opposed to "disappearing", is inconsequential, we must not look for a strategy to interrupt interminability in the null "biological chance" of Baudrillard's death (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 24).

The duality that haunts the final path of his work is that between the irreversibility of the global system, its potentially infinite growth, and the fatal strategies that dwell inside and outside it, potentially reversing it. Abreactions, allergies, virulence, cancer,

terrorism: will all the "extreme phenomena" of repulsion towards the total positivity of the system (Baudrillard, 1993c, pp. 80–84) be sufficient to avert its final realisation? Will they succeed in reclaiming singularity beyond the good and evil of its effects? In the hegemonic network of the system, perhaps they will not. However, in the Baudrillardian "spiral", as he describes the form of his theory (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. ix), matters are not settled. Baudrillard's writing assumes even a 'political' connotation when it invents a form that eludes the integral reality trap.

By keeping this in mind, we comprehend why theory can avoid trying to map the real by adapting things to ideas but, on the contrary, can aim to produce a "parallel world" (*Ibid.*, p. 98). Thought becomes a parallel universe to reaffirm, *in concreto*, that the real is not everything—that "existence isn't everything" but, instead, "even, the least of things" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 13). To do this, Baudrillard, on the one hand, takes the system to its extreme consequences by exacerbating the hypotheses, pretending things have already ended. Only this way can he conceive an equally extreme form of subversion. Indeed, on the other hand, he ruthlessly searches for any possible reversibility that overturns the game, revealing an outcome favourable to the system as a "fatal strategy" to its detriment.

The two levels, the desperate denunciation without consolation and that of the secret rule of duality on which Baudrillard insists are not separate. At the same time, Baudrillard despairs and doubts that this experiment is irreversible, that the western-global system and its power of "self-abasement and universal abasement" can neutralise all forms of reversibility that haunt it and *progress* further. Even if this remained a hypothesis, it would have implied a "drastic revision" of his work (Baudrillard, 2010a, p. 28), which had bet on reversibility ever since *The Consumer Society* (Baudrillard, 1998b).

That is what protects Baudrillard from falling into irreversible interminability. He still formulates hypotheses without ever clinging to a definitive conceptualisation. It is this theoretical mode that he elsewhere calls "fiction" or "fable" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 11) that makes him believe that "no form — not even the highest —escapes reversion or the victorious substitution of another form, as in the game of 'scissors, paper, stone'" (Baudrillard, 2010a, p. 27).

Baudrillard almost seems to take it for granted that "duality can be neither eliminated nor liquidated — it is the rule of the game, the rule of a kind of inviolable pact that seals the reversibility of things", he claims (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 69). We, then, are the ones who lost our sensitivity to the dual. We are the ones who are blinded by the hegemony of oneness. Nevertheless, questioning this rule is legitimate if even Baudrillard raises a doubt: "THESE FATAL STRATEGIES, do they exist?" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 219).

An example? For Baudrillard, we are haunted by the obsession with immortality. Once we have digested the fall of all transcendence, as Nietzsche predicted, we are left with this world identical to itself and with no other ideal equivalents. All that remains is

reality, existence in its miserable banality. We have no escape without redemption or ultra-terrestrial salvation. We are 'nailed' by reality as if by the midday sun. When this life comes to an end, it really will be the end of everything (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. 18): we have become terminally ill for life.

That is why the desperate project of immortality was born: cloning, cryogenisation but, above all, virtualisation of life is, for Baudrillard, the emblem of this new salvation that will never save us (Baudrillard, 2000b, pp. 3–30) because it cannot overcome the realistic plane — a technological 'saving' as files are saved on a hard drive rather than a symbolic 'salvation'? "And once everyone is virtually saved, no one is. Salvation no longer has any meaning" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 107).

It is forbidden to pull the plug because there is nothing left once the transmissions stop — a feeling we are all familiar with when there is a 'temporary down' of the platforms that fill our existences, which, in themselves, appear perfectly empty. It is the emptiness we feel then, we are warned, what awaits us at the end of the operation.

However, the eternal promise (here is the example) is not fatal only insofar as it is imperfect, incomplete and technically perfectible. On the contrary and above all, other fatal strategies arise when it presents itself as the Good, as a promise of infinite improvement. Baudrillard can discern these strategies precisely because he maintains the axiom of reversibility and is sure that duality will be found somewhere. Indeed, he finds it in the form of lethal immortality such as that of viruses and cancer, different forms of "the revenge of the immortal, undifferentiated beings over mortal, sexed beings" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 38) that for us mean simply death. Cancer cells, Baudrillard writes, forget to die and clone themselves into "billions of identical copies, forming a tumour" (*Ibid.*, p. 36). Even in the emblematic case of Henrietta Lacks, the tumour survives the host, so much so that the woman's cells are still being cultivated in the laboratory. Crucially, it is not the scarcity of life but its paroxysmal excess—the approach of a form of immortality—which reveals itself as lethal.

These forms are not just a world parallel to the world of mortals. They also remind us of our becoming and our struggle for death in a very unusual trajectory we rarely consider:

> "Contrary to everything we ordinarily believe, nature first created immortal beings, and it was only by winning the battle for death that we became the living beings that we are. Blindly, we dream of defeating death and achieving immortality, whereas that is our most tragic destiny, a destiny inscribed in the previous life of our cells" (*Ibid.*, p. 37).

This lens completely reconfigures how we look at viruses and the false problem we situate ourselves in during the third crisis of the third millennium, after 9/11 and the financial crash. Baudrillard describes the issue precisely: "We speak always of the struggle of life against death, not of the opposite danger" (*Ibid.*, pp. 36-37). Effectively, today, only a fool could advance the hypothesis that "we have to fight against the

impossibility of dying" (*Ibid.*, p. 37). How could we even think of this sacrilegious idea when everyone believes the world is fighting for its life?

Nevertheless, as suggested previously, dying has become equally impossible as living. The most straightforward explanation is that confinement is necessary to reduce further deaths; therefore, some suffering is justified and inevitable. But this is hypocritical: we know that dying alone in a hospital is a fairly common experience in our societies, as much as living in the screens' interminability. Therefore, these phenomena cannot be seen as contingent and exceptional but, somehow, predestined. What this crisis did was exacerbate and highlight the forms of the interminable that already exist everywhere.

The virus of interminability has long been infecting us, and this depends upon the fact that it is virulence itself is a form of interminability—more precisely, of immortality. The epidemic of immortals is possible only because our societies, like cancerous cells, have also forgotten *how to die.*

Antidotes to a Reality without Antidote: Singularity, Evil, Death

> "Reality, having lost its natural predators, is growing like some proliferating species. A little bit like algae or even like the human race in general. The Real is growing like the desert. 'Welcome to the Desert of the Real'" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 20)

> "However, things are not settled once and for all, for as our society becomes globalized and as we identify, willingly or otherwise, with this integral world, duality resurfaces in all the modalities of disorganization which haunt our systems. And this includes even the denial of our own bodies and our own mental organization, which we manifest in madness, vertigo, absence, disappearance" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 135).

The specific way in which Baudrillard conceives the current order of things could be described as an irreconcilable duality between "Integral Reality", grounded on the total interactivity of all things, and the "world-as-it-is", namely the world seen in the irreducible singularity of its appearances (Baudrillard, 2005b, pp. 23–24). The reality of the global order, tending towards a "total annexation" of the world into its 'nexuses'-networks (Baudrillard, 2010b, pp. 37, 116), is radically opposed to the singularity of forms that reject their integration.

Reality consists of the exponential neutralisation of the singular, inhomogeneous resistances to the globalising process. Conversely, we observe the fatal sprouting of antagonistic, reality-denying, "*rogue events*" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 89). Far from certifying its defeat, this radicalisation is how the singularity of the world, virtually abolished by the global order of things, manages to survive and restructure itself. Transpiring, "showing-through [*transparition*]" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. 36) through the interstices of reality, it confirms the hypothesis of the "*transparence of evil*" through the good, and the imperfection of a reality which aims at its perfect extermination

(Baudrillard, 1996b, p. xi). Effectively, Baudrillard argues that "singularity *is evil*" so far as "it is that which it is impossible to exchange, the portion irreducible to any equivalent whatever" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 171). It consists of an evil not understood morally but, instead, as a counter-form implied by the totalising Good that the Global aims to achieve, and for which singularity is an obstacle and a threat.

One can think of many populist outcomes to referenda and elections in recent years, the movements against the social restrictions and the immunisation campaign since 2020, or the development of the twenty-year US campaign in Afghanistan. These examples portray violent abreaction or indifference towards the global: in both cases, it disturbs its homogenising process. "Every integrating, homogenising society tends, beyond a certain critical threshold (and our societies are now well past this), towards dissociation" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 135). Explaining these allergic symptoms with the mythical ignorance of the masses, negative passions such as fear and hate, or the always fashionable narrative of the cyclical resurgence of retrograde ideologies does not add much to their conventional analysis[58]. Otherwise, it adds too much: willingly or not, these 'excessively interpretative' interpretations are intended to contribute to a dialectical perspective, in which the adversary of (social) reality only assumes a strictly negative and marginal position, which lives off the main, 'positive' one like a parasite to be eradicated. The 'normalisation' of the Good corresponds to the corollary exclusion and, as well, the unthinkability of Evil.

However, another, more literal, view quickly emerges if one considers the demise of the traditional parties (particularly those who used to defend the workers and the disenfranchised), the widespread lack of long-term policies for pandemic prevention and the consequent insufficiency of many national healthcare structures, the all too evident failure of debatable military campaigns which have no regard for the singularity of the people and territories involved and, instead, aim at the imposition of a unique model of living. In all of these instances, the human and non-human forms of singularity are either abandoned to themselves or sacrificed in the name of superior principles. Otherwise, they are sacrificed in the name of the empty spectacle of the signs of civilisation, which mark, at the same time, the absence of those very principles.

---

[58] In Zizek's recent "*Hegel in a Wired Brain*", we find a telling anecdote: "When Trump was elected president, I was asked by a couple of publishers to write a book which would submit the Trump phenomenon to a psychoanalytic critique, and my answer was that we do not need psychoanalysis to explore the 'pathology' of Trump's success — the only thing to psychoanalyze is the irrational stupidity of the left-liberal reactions to it, the stupidity which makes it more and more probable that Trump will be reelected." (Zizek, 2020, p. 196n)

An apparent paradoxical example is portrayed by the so-called 'democracy promotion', which, banally, might be seen as the substitution and eradication of the pre-existing local power structures. Even more so, as Baudrillard notices, its side-effect is "a dilution towards the zero degree of value" of the very structures of the West (Baudrillard, 2003c, pp. 88–89). If Western democracy has come to indicate nothing more than the spectacle of its institutions and procedures, drained of any other spirit than the spectacular, Western democracy is effectively promoted as it is. The problem of how to root a spectacle does not exist by definition because its broadcasting suffices: at the end of the show, we will see some other performances, such as the Taliban reconquest of Afghanistan — which makes us wonder what is actually at stake[59]. That is how the US faithfully promotes their democracy, one of their excellent old TV formats which, each time, they hope, will still work by fascinating the audience. Baudrillard spoke of an "extrapolation of a parody of [Western] values", first of all, "democracy", in a "caricatured, derisory form". "And, though America", he continues, "assumes it will reap the benefits of that model, it is, at the same time, its first victim" (Baudrillard, 2010a, p. 22). Today, with the Trumpian virus, this simulacrum risks having become the actual democracy even in the homeland.

Any equally spectacular *agent provocateur* (trans-political, biological, socio-cultural) can trigger a chaotic chain reaction in these conditions. Let us think of terrorists who learned to use media to their advantage or the even more perfect effects of an inhuman virus on our screens. On the other hand, once the spectacle is insufficient per se as a dissuasion, resorting to hard-core security has become the only way out for governments and citizens. Once there are no more instruments to deal with singularity and the global is only conceived as an exponential integration process of the Good, the *rest* becomes a mere exception. It is a residue which awaits its integration. In this scenario, it is not surprising that the parties of the Left have embraced the same rhetoric of security concerning viruses (and those who are responsible for their ongoing spread) that the Right has often employed toward immigrants or what they saw as the Islamic 'virus' threatening the West. "All the talk is of the minimising of Evil, the prevention of violence: nothing but *security*. This is the condescending and depressive power of good

---

[59] "Promotion is the most thick-skinned parasite in our culture", wrote Baudrillard during the Gulf War. "It would undoubtedly survive a nuclear conflict. It is our Last Judgement. But it is also like a biological function: it devours our substance, but it also allows us to metabolise what we absorb, like a parasitic plant or intestinal flora, It allows us to turn the world and the violence of the world into a consumable substance" (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 31). In other words, it is a form of 'democracy promotion' by other means and, if necessary, without democracy (or with its simulacrum, which amounts to the same thing).

intentions, a power that can dream of nothing except rectitude in the world, that refuses even to consider a bending of Evil, or an intelligence of Evil" (Baudrillard, 1993c, p. 97).

However, 'residues' are singular forms of life. They have a life on their own and not only exist as exceptions to the global order. "It is precisely in such residues that the unsuspected [i.e. 'the stupefying']", namely the antidote to a saturating reality, "may be found today" (Jünger, 2013, p. 4). That is valid for viruses and other "extreme phenomena" of a social kind. Once the global system sees them as pure negativities, *de facto*, it sets them free from any dialectic. The singular, unpredictable effects they produce often amount to a radical denial of the reality imposed on them—and this is symptomatic of the provocation that Integral Reality directs against the world. The integral security requirement brings the antagonism between the global and the singular to the level of terror. It is an exacerbation of duality from both sides. As a response to 'terrorist' phenomena of this kind, the system believes it has "to arm itself with such terrorism and generalize terror on every level" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 42).

That seems to be the case with the security measures imposed after 9/11 and, more recently, the restrictions on sociality or the immunisation rhetoric justified by the coronavirus emergency. Beyond the good and evil of the intentions, it is hard not to hear an air of terror in the words of Italian PM Mario Draghi during a press conference: "The appeal not to get vaccinated is an appeal to die, basically. You don't get vaccinated, you get sick, you die. Or you kill: you don't get vaccinated, you get sick, you contaminate, someone dies" (Lettig, 2021). And whereas an apparent majority of the population seems not only to accept but to want more of this 'reassuring terror' (we must discuss this mysterious conformism as well), it is equally clear that terror triggers further spontaneous processes of a radical kind. In sum, "at the same time as all dialectical resolution disappears, the extremes come to the fore" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 100).

Whether good or bad, it is only in these processes that we find the only antidotes to total reality today. Even a virus and "natural disasters" in general, for Baudrillard, can be seen as an ultimate "precious and supernatural sign of denial" from the side of the world (Baudrillard, 1993c, p. 80). That does not make them desirable (and this confusion cost Baudrillard a lot[60]). Nonetheless, and all sides admit it, these phenomena can objectively

---

[60] The following quote by Bruno Latour exemplifies the contempt toward the "critical barbarity" of Baudrillard's literal analyses in an excellent way: "I don't think it is a coincidence that these two critical barbarities have struck the World Trade Center one after the other: the first by destroying it to rubble, the second, adding insult to injury, by claiming that it was the deed of victims themselves, helped by the CIA or the Mossad... But it is Baudrillard who has the honor of putting the last nail in the coffin of criticism [ironically, something he would be very proud of]: has he not claimed that the Towers, 'icons of a self destroying capitalism' (Mr. Bin Laden *dixit*), had deconstructed *themselves* by attracting passing planes to

destabilise, deploying a 'viral terror', a system that secures life to an increasing extent. And it is equally sure that the global system will reply with even higher blackmail, which in turn stimulates Evil to transpire in still different ways, through the net of the Good, and so on.

This situation confirms that the dialectical equilibrium of Good and Evil is all too easily conceived. An increase in the Good rate does not amount to a decrease of Evil but, more often, to its radicalisation and 'high-pressure release'. In Musil's words, "this posing of problems as pairs of opposites, this agglomeration, or these 'either-or' formulations" is a sign "that too little intellectual work is being done" (Musil, 1990, p. 127). Conversely, on the '*route-Baudrillard*', duality assumes a far more literal and entirely im-moralistic perspective: any effect, any singularity has its own life which cannot be reduced to an error or a deviation from a normalising process. Employing Agamben's words, it is "a life inseparable from its form" (Agamben, 2016, p. 232), whereby its interpretation as a deviation, as an error, distracts from its peculiarity and irreducibility. The attempt to reduce singularity (including the radical denial they direct towards the global system) to an exception or a mistake always betrays a partial view of the world. Exclusion reveals the pursuit of a homogenising hegemony, which aims to overcome the opposition between universal and particular. The integrative network model of the global becomes the absolute antithesis of the singular that (unlike the general with the particular) does not leave space for it. Conversely, in a more literal, amoralistic theory of singularity, the irreducibility of the latter is fully recognised. And since it comprises the only possible, often dramatic, freedom from global hegemony, examining its expressions becomes decisive.

But if there is a different relation between the totalising Good and the unsuspected expressions of Evil, how can that be articulated? Baudrillard believes this relation has nothing moral to it and is governed by a 'metaphysical rule': that of *reversibility*. Good and Evil, usually conceived as different possibilities of subjective will, are seen as independent and fundamental principles that respond to their respective challenges. The hypothesis of reversibility rejects the dialectical, zero-sum equilibrium between good and evil, whereby an increase in good corresponds to a decrease in evil. Instead, it opts for a radical and irreducible duality between the two, based on symbolic provocation: an excess of one principle can trigger an unpredictable response from the other side. An excess of security measures can trigger the emergence of even more

---

commit suicide?... ((2002) L'esprit du terrorisme, Galilée, Paris). One can only hope that this ultimate gesture, this ultimate self-destruction of nihilist thought about a nihilistic act of self-destruction, will be the last gasp of critical barbarity.... History shows, alas, that nihilism has no bottom" (Latour, 2003, p. 17).

radical terroristic phenomena, for instance. This also means that, in practice, evil does not sprout out of the absence of the good but, more often and dangerously, from its overabundance, obesity and ecstatic forms. What appears as good can turn out to be, reversibly, the worst evil. In other words, reversibility indicates that every system's development contains its principle of disappearance, of death, and that this death is not an accident or a failure but, instead, the outcome of its very development. "Every system that approaches perfect operativity simultaneously approaches its downfall" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 4).

Since the beginning, particularly from *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993b), reversibility becomes one of the crucial features of Baudrillard's thought and a weapon used to demolish the most prominent critical theories of the time. His attacks on Deleuze's idea of desire, Lyotard's concept of intensity, and particularly Foucault's theory of power are well-known. However, what underlies them is that their deconstruction is only partial, halting precisely where it should have proceeded, thus re-substantialising the process in an irreversible principle. In other words, deconstruction is always aimed at a further (re)construction, which makes it the most subtly constructive process. Baudrillard calls it "a weak form of thought" and "the inverse gloss of constructive structuralism" (Baudrillard, 1996a, p. 25), and the outcomes of the theories above seem to confirm it. Deconstruction leads to even more indestructible essences than an open constructive intention [61]. As it fails to destroy them, the deconstructing process subtly reinforces them — it appears to guarantee their 'fluidity' when, in fact, it (ideologically) justifies the whole system it is deconstructing. Borrowing Ceronetti's words, we could conclude: "Some forms of construction are far more damaging than any destruction" (Ceronetti, 1993, p. 81). Thus, in the name of radical reversibility, Baudrillard urges to directly "destroy" and "not deconstruct" (Baudrillard, 1996a, p. 25). He accuses those theories of reintroducing surreptitious irreversibility where they should have continued their deconstruction literally 'onto death'.

"Speculation to the death" is all that remains when the danger is not this or that idea but their irreversible form. Indeed, this form corresponds to the logic of integral reality and our incapacity to conceive the world in any other way. In the realm of the global "system that is purely life" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 121), death "as a *form*" corresponds to the principle of reversibility, or "what waits at the *term* of the system, and the symbolic

[61] "Desire and intensity remain *force*/notions; with Foucault power remains, despite being pulverized, a *structural* and a polar notion with a perfect genealogy and an inexplicable presence, a notion which cannot be surpassed in spite of a sort of latent denunciation, a notion which is whole in each of its points or microscopic dots. It is hard to see how it could be reversed" (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 49)

extermination that stalks the system itself" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 5). It consists in the death of any exclusively positive system, the life of which is strictly deadly, so far as it is based on the extermination of death, evil, singularity, and anything irreducible to its reality principle. Like evil and singularity, this "death" is not the opposite of life, namely physical extermination. It is instead the irreducible duality of these principles and the consequent rejection of anything irreversible. Death is, on the one hand, what is "inscribed everywhere in [the system's] operational logic"—the immediate reversibility of its operations, the ambiguity for which a security measure is simultaneously a measure of terror. On the other, it consists in the "radical counter-finality ex-scribed on the system as such, but which haunts it everywhere" (*Ibid.*, p. 5)—that is, the inevitable reversal of the system as a whole. Precisely, the point is that death awaits nevertheless. Moreover, it assumes a far more lethal form when it is not symbolically managed, as the rituals of earlier societies could do (*Ibid.*, pp. 131-132). The fatality of an excess of life confirms that any system of this kind, unable to conceive the reversibility of forms, the metamorphosis of one form into another, the cycle of its appearances, will face higher reversibility at the limit of its process.

All things considered, and despite our best intentions, it is impossible to separate the functional life of any system from its death, both intrinsic and extrinsic. We seem to have forgotten these rules, but this is valid in particular for the system which our reality is, whose objective appears to be the extirpation of death, failure and evil in all their forms:

> "And we try, in some sense, to make a system that is purely life. Life without death. And that is ex-termination. Not by the negative but, on the contrary, by the excess of positivity, excess of life and so on" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 121)

Returning to a current example, the incapacity to conceive a limit to the COVID emergency, the pretence that all the population [62] should be immunised before discussing the return to a phantasmal 'normality', is a sign of this. Virtually, the aim of our immunisation processes is the zero-risk frontier, which might correspond ironically to the zero-degree of the social, hence also with a form of death. Moreover, this death is way more inevitable insofar as there *really* is no alternative unless we reverse our entire reality. That is why, perhaps, the spectacle of the global emergency will be put aside for a while until a further provocation justifies its immediate return. It is here that we can see how this system's pure life is something "untenable" precisely as "it fails to inscribe

---

[62] Ironically, for example, prioritising the low-risk categories of the West over the high-risk ones of other continents.

its own death" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 4). And it is even more untenable insofar as it is not merely imposed upon us but increasingly willed. Zero risk and total security for everyone *really* seem to be an excellent virtual horizon.

Does this mean that we are opting for this pure life that resembles death, as Agamben also seemed to think in the summer of 2021, comparing the behaviour of current humanity to the staged mass suicide of lemmings (Agamben, 2021b)?

Prohibited and Prohibitive Thought

> "Thought has become an extremely rare commodity, prohibited and prohibitive, which has to be cultivated in secret places following esoteric rules" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 106).

In 1995, Baudrillard wrote: "we are already in a state of full-scale prohibition" of thought (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 106). Even today, when an invisible prohibition is way too evident, we would probably hear the same objection as then: in our societies, everyone is allowed to speak. However, that would underestimate the McLuhanian *adagio*, which assigns overarching importance to the medium over the message (McLuhan, 1964). This importance has increased dramatically in what Baudrillard calls "the metaphysics of the code" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 57), in which every content is virtually and formally the same—once more, the extermination of the other.

The fact that even fierce denunciations of the current system have a space in the media does not mean anything. Quite the contrary, borrowing Junger's observation, it has the function of that 10% of opposition that any political regime needs to preserve to offer an image of legitimacy (Jünger, 2013). The mere presence of dissent can be in the perfect interest of the single principle that dominates the world as long as dissent is (rendered) innocuous. As a confirmation, during the viral emergency, the dissenting voices have been reduced to folkloric figures, with terminology that goes from the 'irresponsible' to the 'dotard' even towards Nobel prizes and intellectuals who were highly respected until the day before. Agamben has rightfully underlined the use of "two infamous terms" to disqualify any unaligned thought — "denier" and "conspiracy theorist" (Agamben, 2021d). This way, the formal illusion of a dissenting denunciation is maintained, but the thought is pre-emptively ridiculed.

To avoid that, there is no other way but to cultivate the singularity of thought so that its reduction to these caricatures becomes impossible. Many theorists, Agamben included, have been unable to avoid this fate due to the abovementioned conditions. However, might something in their expressions also allow them to be reduced to such nullity? Effectively, if we review the interventions of those who have expressed critical dissent towards how the viral emergency was handled, they could not refrain from reality. By this, I mean that they intervened in '*realist*' questions, such as the efficacy of vaccines

and the strategies adopted, contesting something on which other forces have a monopoly.

Since his early works, Baudrillard suggests that "We will never defeat the system on the plane of the real", the one that "the system itself" imposes". Indeed, the system's strategy of survival is "always leading those who attack [it] to fight amongst each other on the terrain of reality, *which is always the reality of the system*" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 36). This is particularly decisive in an ultra-reality, a complete change of paradigm in which there is no empty interstice or space of subversion. In this scenario, "Critical intelligence no longer measures up to the collapse of reality and to the passage into total reality". This is because it still gives credit to reality, implying that it has not achieved its completion yet, "it remains pious and denunciatory" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 39). In sum, it does not constitute any danger for an absolute reality—it is conciliatory.

Therefore, considering Agamben and other fierce denunciations of the current system, their deficiency might be that they opted for a prohibited thought (e.g. the contestation of the vaccination campaign and the green pass) but not for a prohibitive thought. What would that consist of?

Baudrillard enigmatically writes:

> "Everything must take place in secret. We shall take the view that the official thought market is universally corrupt and implicated in the prohibition of thought by the dominant clerisy. Every intervention by critical, enlightened and right-thinking intellectuals, all of them politically correct even when they do not know it, will be considered vacuous and shameful" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 106).

This is undoubtedly shared by Agamben, who, in a recent conference, refused to comment on the response of Italian intellectuals to the current situation. However, Baudrillard also suggests: "Spirit away the reality file to wipe out all its conclusions" (*Ibid.*). If we are subjected to the blackmail of reality—that is, to act on its principles alone—the preservation of illusion, ambivalence and the mystery of phenomena in thought is "the only political–or transpolitical–act that can be accomplished by the person who writes" (*Ibid.*, p. 104). A prohibitive thought aims at this "poetic singularity of the analysis" rather than the rational discussion of reality and its organisation. Indeed, if thought "takes objective, rational truth as its aim, it is defeated before it even starts – by the experts, the logicians or the sophists" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 155). This situation is very familiar to us: the case of some virologists or public figures who relentlessly promote identical syllogisms, liquidating any singularity in their speaking, confirms it.

"The radical prediction is always the prediction of the non-reality of facts, of the illusoriness of the state of fact" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 99). This means that facts must not be analysed in their objective reality, which consists of a mask that dissolves their literal sense, a form of illusion in the pejorative sense. Objective reality reduces the flow

of appearances to causes, effects, relations and categories in general. Instead, the literal sense of facts lies in their pure illusoriness, which multiplies and disseminates the hypotheses: "facts are factitious, as their name suggests" (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 92). Rather than deciphering the phenomenon, thought "anagrammatizes, it disperses concepts and ideas" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 105). It seeks to see how things become something else and contaminate each other without passing by meaning and historical reconstructions. From the literal standpoint, facts "are only what they are but, by that very fact, they are necessarily beyond" (*Ibid.*, p. 99). Then, their illusoriness and ambivalence are what should be thought. Concerning the viral emergency, this implies refraining from the techno-realistic explanations and turning towards the virus's own thought. How does the virus think us and our societies, which increasingly seem to be the real target of the emergency measures?

Back to Normal: The Lethal Farce of Security

"Normality is death" (Adorno, 1974, p. 56).

"In the name of the highest possible degree of security, an *endemic* terror may well be instituted that is in every way as dangerous as the *epidemic* threat of catastrophe" (Baudrillard, 1993c).

The destiny of our societies is so transparent that it sometimes appears unbearably banal. In this sense, nothing appears more banal than the coronavirus emergency that exploded in 2020. The incredible abundance of books on this allegedly epochal phenomenon signals its symbolic poverty—the profusion of signs often corresponding with the event's misery. The banality of Good, in particular of security, has reached such an exponential level that even its denunciation appears absurd. The few critics who can make a serious counter-discourse assume the romantic aura of those who still hope for the resurrection of the dead—sociality, democracy, rights, freedoms...

On the contrary, in 1979, Baudrillard announced that we no longer live in the era of laws and contracts but have moved to norms and models. From sociality to security: "we live in a society of minimal stakes and risks. If the terms were not contradictory, one could say that security has become our destiny. It might be the case, moreover, that this outcome will be fatal for our society — the mortality of overprotected species which, in their domestication, are dying of too much security" (Baudrillard, 1990c, p. 154). At the time, the need for security seemed to counterbalance the threat of nuclear extermination and internal political terrorism. However, it was already clear that the security paradigm amounted to a new form of socialisation rather than an emergency measure.

The "catastrophe", writes Benjamin, is that everything is always the same (Benjamin, 1999, p. 473). The production of this 'ever-the-same', the reassurance of the status quo,

is the 'transpolitical' operation of our societies, which have become, more than societies, security agencies. The crisis is foreseen in advance, to the extent that the climate of "permanent suspense and emergency" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 57) that reigns might even be considered an attraction for threats rather than a response. The principle of virtuality is reconfirmed: normality is not the absence of exceptions but the virtual expectation of a fatality. Therefore, it is exceptional: "the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 257). Baudrillard noticed that the media are often on the crime scene before the rescue teams. He even hypothesised that the presence of media could attract fatality, a hypothesis which could sound bizarre and the figment of the imagination of a Ballard, but which precipitates into reality with events such as the death of Princess Diana.

Running from security has become quite hopeless, even if one keeps a safe distance from the disaster *scene*. Risk reduction can penetrate all fields of life, even down to the private sphere and people's fundamental rights, as occurred during the coronavirus emergency. In this sense, we witness an exacerbation of this general spirit, and it is pointless to attack governments and politicians. After all, even if it were, the generalised consensus would render any effort ineffective—yet another sign of this prevailing spirit. In the monotony of emergency decisions worldwide, we have observed a mere race to reduce risks, nominate the best techno-scientific consultants, and apply models and promulgate norms.

These are the new rules of the game rather than the fruit of political decisions. In this sense, perhaps, Italy is winning this game[63], notwithstanding (or precisely because) one of the highest death tolls in the world—maximum risk and maximum security do not contradict each other. The nomination of a technocratic PM and a government supported by practically all the political 'forces' (ironical to define them such) in the country, justified by the need to reassure both the population, the markets and the international institutions, is the best example of our transpolitical situation. The order of security issues figures who assist a vaporised political class and masses of citizens fluctuating in the void of statistics and information. What is left to politicians is a race to be at the frontline of security in the different disciplines: containment of immigration,

---

[63] As indicated by the "COVID-19 Stringency Index" elaborated by the University of Oxford, which evaluates Italy's response to the emergency as one of the strictest in the world. To confirm this, a recent article by the Washington Post commenting on "one of the world's strictest workplace vaccine mandates" affirmed that "Italy pushed into new territory for a Western democracy" (Harlan and Pitrelli, 2021)

epidemiological war, climate catastrophe, etc. There are many themes, right and left-wing-like flavours, but one response: security.

Effectively, security is not a political choice, a subjective decision. It is, rather, an objective state of the system (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 58). No subjectivity, in this sense, can go against it and restore the previous paradigm of sociality, and since "there is no longer a responsible subject, each event, even a minimal one, must be desperately imputed to someone or something—everyone is responsible" (Ibid.). Security goes hand in hand with the idea that everyone is a potential terrorist, as much as a potential hostage — a potential anointer, as much as a potential 'at-risk subject'.

"The problem of security, as we know, haunts our societies and long ago replaced the problem of liberty" (*Ibid.*). For Baudrillard, the passage from the law to norms and models corresponds to the passage from the social to security. In this case, the often mentioned 'normality' has to be understood slightly more unsettlingly: normality is the continuous normalisation process, as the production of security at every level. "Normality is death", wrote Adorno (1974, p. 56). The pretence of reassuring, of sealing our societies from evil, risks provoking an even worse evil. With an ambiguously extreme pessimism that ends up sounding like a weird optimism, Baudrillard often points out that every evil protects us from a worse evil. For example, "terrorism is still a lesser evil than a police state capable of ending it" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 69). Indeed, such a 'remedy' does not limit itself to suppressing terrorism but also the rest of social life. The hypothesis translates well in current events, specifically regarding the hyper-conformist response to the virus outbreak. Following the logic above, the pandemic would still be a lesser evil than an epidemic of security. What does this tell us? Moreover, are we sure that the virus has come out of nothing, whereas our responses are the only strategic element in this conjecture? Would it be so absurd to consider the virus as the response to the earlier provocation of reducing the world to the single principle of reality?

Another aspect helps see things more lucidly, as it emerges from the media ultra-rhetoric hinted above. The hysterical reminders that there is only one way to do things—and in any case, to 'stay safe'—appear almost as a self-reassurance in the panic of a peculiarly ambiguous virus. Although the scientific debate runs to establish unambiguous truth, the virus remains paradoxically ambivalent almost three years after its appearance, seemingly verifying all opposing hypotheses. It has been defined as natural, artificial, extremely dangerous, and similar to the flu... Is it just a matter of time before we discover the objective truth? Perhaps. However, it is more interesting to see coronavirus as definitively ambiguous. This ambivalence effect is a perfect figure of what Baudrillard often called the "evil genie of the object" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 108), with its "ironic strategies" (*Ibid.*, p. 97). If we think about it, there is no subtler response to the seriousness of security than an ironical virus, which threw the world into the tragic parody of its reality. 'Social distancing' is perhaps the best example of the ridicule in which we have ended thanks to our hallucinatory principles: a sprinkle of sociality in a bath of security. The farce of security is the penalty to be paid for provoking the world

with the dream of security. As Baudrillard wrote about AIDS and cancer, coronavirus becomes "an attempt to cure [the system's] *banal* virulence by recourse to a *fatal* form" (Baudrillard, 1993c, p. 66).

We can then return to Agamben's preoccupation regarding the mass suicide of the species due to the vaccination campaign. Fortunately, we can let Agamben know that it might be already too late to worry: "the suicide of the species" comes, more ironically, from "the immersion into banality" (Baudrillard, 2011, p. 46). The spectacle of our societies caught up with this latest emergency appears to be something of this kind.

INTERRUPTOR-EVENTS:
THE COVID WAR AND THE UKRAINIAN VIRUS

Introduction: The Spectres of Our Obsolescence

In this chapter, the phenomenology of interminability and its interruptions becomes an examination of current events. By happy coincidence, reality has produced a paradigmatic and, in some ways, parodic example. The themes discussed so far are illustrated anthologically by reality itself, starting with the coronavirus emergency. Much better than theory, the coronavirus pandemic exhibits the society in which we live in one spectacular view, in a 'screenshot' of our condition. At the same time, similarly to a screenshot, it is an interruption of the social flow. However, it is an interruption only up to a point, concealing a complementary acceleration of digital flows and the digitalisation of the world.

During the emergency outbreak, the normality mantra resounded everywhere. Many hoped and assured us we would return to it soon. Others argued that this was an opportunity to rethink and correct our normality. Effectively, the virus lent itself to both interpretations. In light of this, few attempted to hold them together in a single thought. To lean towards one or the other can be comforting for those who believe it was an accident and those who fantasise about malicious plots.

Nevertheless, the thinking we have developed in this thesis allows us, indeed requires us, to think of the event in its irreducible dualism. On the one hand, the virus is an extreme expression of normality. I refer to the normality of generalised exchange, which globally connects all 'local' undesirable effects. In this sense, the virus is a message that travels without barriers throughout the global network. I am also referring to the technological advancement that enables this exchange and, according to one

147

hypothesis, may have allowed the virus to leak from the Wuhan laboratory (e.g. Ritchie, 2021).

As explained in the previous chapter, the extreme sophistication of a system also produces, through the same process of sophistication, effects opposite to it. Perhaps the virus is produced by the system. In any case, its propagation, and thus the pandemic, is made possible by the system. A universe cleansed of barriers and made smooth and homogeneous allows the infection to propagate. Thanks to technological purification, it loses its antibodies as the organism comes into less and less contact with germs and diseases. That is the malign effect of the 'best' of our systems. The hygienic-prophylactic universe opens the way for the virus.

But the virus is no longer part of the system: it is a particle of otherness that has arisen within it and puts it in check. If it travels on the global network, it does so silently, without making a spectacle of itself before its nefarious effects appear. Even its detection in the organism is not evident and requires technological tools.

The system, which, as we have seen, struggles to imagine and manage otherness, finds no other strategy than retaliating against the challenge of the virus with the same tools that made it possible. Tests to detect it, digital control of contagions, 24/7 communication, continuous statistics and vaccines comprise the system's active and often effective response. Nevertheless, they also reveal that the system can only respond to the same with the same: it responds to a problem made possible by the technological apparatus with the same technological apparatus. On the other hand, at the level of reality, the virus cannot be distinguished from the host. Likewise, on the strictly real level, the pandemic cannot be differentiated from the society it infected. Hence, the enemy becomes the individual itself and society itself.

The only possible strategy is shutting down society, interrupting the movements of the organisms that coincide with those of the virus. However, the 'terrain' that made all this possible is not closed down but strengthened. This strengthening translates into the purification of social reality from human bodies. Reducing social life to degree zero corresponds to an exponential increase in global exchange but in its digital-only version. It is finally revealed as the actual social-real model, in the face of which the human being appears not only antiquated (Anders, 1956, 1980) but useless and harmful. Once the hypocrisies of nostalgia for the real are gone, it is openly stated that there is nothing wrong with working remotely, shopping online or finding one's partner on dating platforms. Nor is there anything wrong with restricting travel rights and using services for individuals who have not been vaccinated. That *really* makes society's functioning more efficient and less risky — especially with individual digital certification. At the same time, it overshadows other principles, such as being able to visit the moribund.

Does the severe emergency and the provisional nature of the measures justify such overshadowing, or did those principles already disappear? With minimal resistance to

how it is applied, digitalisation has long been considered a universal blessing. So is medical technology and its implicit project of removing ills and death from our life. Thus, the virus asks us a fundamental question: are you sure that the society you are working on also includes you human beings? Or are you aiding an irreversible process that gradually disqualifies you from society? Are not your imperfect bodies and non-automated thinking obstacles to the complete integration of reality?

With these questions in mind, the chapter asks whether humanity is not exterminating itself through the progress that is supposed to ensure its well-being. Providing additional material for the analysis, the chapter also examines the issue of war and nuclear threats. As illustrated by the Ukrainian war, this threat also reveals the ambiguity of integral reality. In particular, real-time information can be seen in two seemingly antithetical ways. On the one hand, it can neutralise what is happening, exorcising it in images or making the truth of the facts forever undecidable.

On the other hand, this same undecidability, the unlimited availability of incompatible versions, produces dangerous effects of uncertainty. Therefore, it can destabilise balances and trigger escalations out of control. The nuclear threat is a paradigmatic illustration of this ambiguity. Baudrillard had already analysed its scope in the Cold War years. Our will to spectacle, he said, seems to prevent the final bomb from being used. Indeed, it would deprive us of the possibility of witnessing the spectacle and continuing to exchange information. However, as the COVID emergency teaches us, having crossed the human threshold of our destiny could put everything in doubt. If things no longer evolve with a view to our well-being (or will to spectacle) but that of a technological purification of the world, the situation changes dramatically. This chapter aims to identify these symbolic challenges the events confront us with.

Disappearing Events: The Virus Which Thinks Us

> "The phenomenon is not detached from the observer, but inter-twined and involved with him" (Goethe, 1998, n. 1224).

> "[…] the virus is itself information. If it gets through better than the other information, this is because, biologically speaking, it is both the medium and the message" (Baudrillard, 1996a, p. 52)

> "As soon as [the news media] are both involved in and involved by the course of phenomena, it is the news media that are the event. It is the event of news coverage that substitutes itself for the coverage of the event" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 103).

A literal phenomenology of disappearance applies perfectly, perhaps too much so, to the events we are currently involved with—the endless viral years inaugurated in 2020 and a war in Ukraine that does not promise to resolve itself soon. On the one hand, the pandemic and the conflict illustrate the disappearance of events into information and

virtual reality and the consequent transfusion of effects between existence and the inseparable screen. On the other hand, specifically concerning this thesis, the prefiguring capacity of Baudrillard's works is so accurate that we risk losing any singularity as we analyse what they anticipated long ago. Playing on words, we could even define these events and the extreme phenomena surrounding them as 'Baudrillardian all too Baudrillardian'. How, in Baudrillard's spirit, do we defend our analysis from Baudrillard?

Baudrillard wrote on security and the terroristic effect of natural catastrophes extensively and particularly early. In the 1983 book *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, we read that "the terrorist act is akin to the natural catastrophe" since both constitute an "intervention" that disrupts the system's functioning. "Nature is terrorist", he continues, "as is the abrupt failure of the whole technological system: the great New York black-outs ('65 and '77) create more wonderful terrorist situations than the true ones, dream situations". Baudrillard considered these "accidents" particularly exciting insofar as they "illustrate the possibility of a radical *subjectless* subversion" (Baudrillard, 1983a, pp. 56–57). When we think about the events of the pandemic, this is a fascinating idea. It is complemented by Baudrillard's argument of the "antiterrorist world system that ends up internalizing terror, inflicting terror on itself and emptying itself of all political substance—to the point of turning against its own population" (Baudrillard, 1983a, p. 115).

Reapplying the same analyses to what we have observed would almost appear enough — and the chapter does not ignore their prefigurative capacity. Moreover, it would be a paradigm of Baudrillard's idea that "[t]he event impacts on thought even before it has occurred", the idea that thought is an anticipated version of what occurs in events (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 4). However, that is not entirely sufficient. As happens with information, when an event and its theoretical version coincide, we risk ignoring the unexpected element that makes the proper event. At the same time, we risk reducing thought to a cheap "prophecy" and "prediction". In the exact quote, Baudrillard also emphasises that thought "finds its fulfilment in something that wholly escapes it" (*Ibid.*). In light of this, the chapter is a chance to reinvent Baudrillard's analyses and their singularity, mainly if, in his words, they were realised and found their end (*Ibid.*).

The over-information of months of media virality and these theoretical anticipations on virulence and war (e.g. Baudrillard, 1993c, 2003c, 1995, 2005b) constitute a challenge for this chapter. None of our events pre-exists or is detached from its disappearance into either information or theory. The two can only be distinguished abstractly. The disappearance of one into the other produces the "generalized feedback effect" of Integral Reality (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 75). In any case, a form of disappearance is involved, and even by writing about it, we are complicit with it.

However, this is not a depressive way to start a chapter. Having theorised that disappearance is not an annihilation but a peculiar form that things assume in certain

conditions, we can consider it not only 'negatively'—as a void, a nothingness—but, so to say, as a 'positive' constellation, inseparable from the appearance of what disappears. The double disappearance of virtuality and events cannot be ignored or removed without removing the object of analysis. The disappearance of these events is the material we have at our disposal: as a preliminary hypothesis, how they disappear might reveal a form of singularity. *Disappearance is part of the singularity of the event*, of the peculiar way it appears.

For this reason, we can only attempt to maximise the apparent convergence of thought and event, as much as that of information and event, to the extreme. Only then can we determine if and to what extent they converge and disappear into their more or less perfect integration. This integration's success or failure might reveal a singular way of appearing (and disclose new Baudrillardian trajectories to be developed).

First, we can consider the disappearance of these phenomena in an all too fascinating theory and the seamless disappearance of theory as it realises itself. Considering these two events through Baudrillard and their impact on Baudrillard's thought, we repeat his approach towards the 'timeliness': "to measure the angle of incidence" on "a parallel world with which a perpetual confrontation is going on" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. 98). The level of their disappearance measures what is left of the mutual challenge between reality and radical thought and questions whether "the vanishing of thought into the actual course of the world" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 70), instead, is virtually complete.

In the last *Cool Memories*, Baudrillard warns that "theory is not made to be realised. Its effectuation is also its death" (*Ibid.*, p. 85). For this reason, theory must maintain an enigmatic quality—the one it hopes to return to the world—and refrain from coinciding with any reality. "Thought must at all cost keep itself from reality, from the real projection of ideas and their translation into acts" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 72). The rule is always the same: something preserves its singularity as long as it remains irreducible, unexchangeable for any equivalent (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 171). That includes, for theory as well, any fixed conceptual identity, any static systematisation, which is the subtlest form of equivalence—the equivalence of theory with itself.

In any case, the impossibility of the exchange is guaranteed by the ambivalence that dominates the relationship between the same and the other, and here in particular between thought and the world, their "reciprocal alteration" (*Ibid.*, p. 31):

> "Physical alteration of the world by consciousness, metaphysical alteration of consciousness by the world: there is no cause to ask where this begins, or 'who thinks whom'" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 32).

A banal example: many of these pages could have been written by a body infected by the virus. Considering that, can we exclude that the inflammation and the other processes underway have conditioned the use of certain words, the formation of specific ideas and

the development of certain arguments? As Baudrillard would have said, is it not the virus that thinks me as much as I think it?

Immediately complicating the idea, in *Cool Memories*, Baudrillard also affirms something slightly different: "[t]he most perfect synthesis of theory and practice is the vanishing of thought into the actual course of the world" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 70). Does this mean, against what has been stated, that the perfect synthesis of the two is the loss of their singularity? Not really. Instead, Baudrillard indicates the inevitable loss of their identity in that "reciprocal alteration" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 31). The fact that thought is a phenomenon of the world and that the world is always given in the form of ideas and concepts ensures that the two alter each other continuously.

In this perpetual confrontation, the same encounters the singularity of the other and one's alterity as the other encounters it. Therefore, what is singular is not an identity preserved by isolating oneself—an 'idiotic' form of isolation that is impossible to achieve. What is singular are the *forms that result from this encounter: for instance, the writing* altered by the virus in its peculiar, singular way. Singularity is, in other words, an expression rather than a possession: "singular existence—the mode—is neither a substance nor a precise fact but an infinite series of modal oscillations, by means of which substance always constitutes and expresses itself" (Agamben, 2016, p. 172).

If thought and the world coincided, we would have a dissipation of singularity, but their reciprocal alteration prevents it. Paradoxically, their contamination preserves their singularity—an idea which should induce both any xenophobe and the advocate of a homogenised, hyper-integrated earth to reflect. Both coinciding with oneself and someone else is erroneous and entirely utopian. The encounter allows us to become other rather than remaining an 'idiotic' re-presentation of ourselves. In any case, we will not coincide with the other: once the encounter has occurred, the alteration has occurred, too. It is always too late to distinguish what belongs to one from what belongs to the other. *Singularity lives in the disappearance of identity*: "one becomes only what one is not" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 171). Already in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard wrote:

> "Identity is untenable: it is death, since it fails to inscribe its own death"
> (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 4)

Not surprisingly, the issue of identity and the oblivion of death are two faces of the current phenomena. In the obligation to adhere to a representation of oneself—it does not matter how 'personalised'—singularity is effaced, at least on the surface. So, we are obsessed with defending our national, sexual, political, or other identity and, more generally, with preserving the identity of our life against death. We want to preserve it from contamination with the other and death, affirming explicitly the sacredness of our biological survival and its maximum prolongment—the physical and metaphysical will to

survive. But all of these are inert representations, attempts at dying as a singularity—whereas life is the inevitable expression of singularity in its ceaseless becoming-other.

Yet, the passion for becoming-other and colluding with the other is surpassed by that of coinciding with ourselves. Eventually, this means coinciding with a code, becoming our *virtual* self. The risk of emancipating oneself from an oppressive category by adding new categories gives the impression of freedom. At the same time, it retains and reproduces the oppressive form which resides in categorising. What is ignored is that, above the *domination* of a particular category and its real and violent consequences, we have the *hegemony* of categorisation itself. A pseudo-Goethe would have said: 'Mighty is Category, mightier the Code'[64] — indeed, these are all forms of the reality code.

Returning to thought and the world—namely, on Baudrillard and current events—the method should have been clarified. We now understand why applying Baudrillard and verifying his theory would produce a dead result. That would force his form of thought to coincide with an arbitrary conceptual representation—"the bare result is the corpse which has left the guiding tendency behind it" (Hegel, 1977, n. 3). But even if we attempted, the preservation of those conclusions would be already altered *a priori*. As another subject thinks Baudrillard's writings, those writings have become exactly like an object, like the virus: as both have been contaminated, we cannot distinguish anymore what of the writings belongs to our thinking and what of our thinking is an echo of the writings.

Having ascertained this, we should accept the constant destruction of Baudrillard's 'original' analyses and welcome their unfolding singularity. The crucial quality to focus on is how those ideas become something other through contamination and contagion, which, at this point, have to be encouraged. What could be better than a provoked theoretical contagion to start writing about the viral years?

Screen Coverage as a Pact of Disappearance

> "We have, then, to pass through the non-event of news coverage (information) to detect what resists that coverage. To find, as it were, the 'living coin' of the event. To make a literal analysis of it, against all the machinery of commentary and stage-management that merely neutralizes it" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 104).

---

[64] The original quote would be: "Mighty is Law, mightier Necessity" (Goethe, 1876, p. 43).

The other difficulty a radical analysis faces is conceiving the event's singularity as the latter already presents itself in its virtual form. The irreducibility of events cannot be envisioned as a supposed purity from the screens, and not simply because of the overload of images which render it materially impossible. Precisely as the virus does, there is a total transfusion and contamination between the media and existence. It is logically impossible to distinguish between the effects of information and those of a supposed physically frequented world versus the online world — increasingly so since the latter started to "physically damage our neurological selves" (Pettman, 2016, p. 119). In the case of events, as soon as the news media "are both involved in and involved by the course of phenomena, it is the news media that are the event". And "the event of news coverage […] substitutes itself for the coverage of the event" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 103). This substitution achieves extreme consequences in events like those we analyse.

Compared with the rest of our daily non-events, the scenario of coronavirus and Ukraine is aggravated by two aspects: first, the fascination that these phenomena exert on our imagination, with the consequent media overdose we subject ourselves to; second, the lethality rendered possible by this material colonisation of the shared imaginary. The first corresponds with the translation of the event into virtual reality, which creates the condition for a violent materialisation of virtuality.

Starting from this second, more violent aspect, we observe that images become weapons and killers when they fail to be deterrence. The principal figure of the war, President Zelensky, has resorted to social media and digital videoconferencing, filming real-time short films in the still-smouldering ruins or intervening at the most important political institutions. This is done not solely to communicate information but to fight a war where real-time and information are anything but an ornament or a secondary weapon.

We could even hypothesise that Ukrainian success depends substantially upon its mediatic talent—Russia's often highlighted old-school approach is not just a matter of martial tactic as much as one of social media marketing strategies. This does not underestimate the crucial backup obtained from the West. On the contrary, most probably, without Zelensky's talent and appeal, the popular imagination and that of politicians would not have embraced the Ukrainian cause so passionately (on the downsides of Western media adulation, see Bell, 2023). If Zelensky's videos looked like Putin's baleful ones, the Western aids—we can hypothesise—could have been less swift and massive, which would not have guaranteed an equally efficient resistance.

In cinematographic terms, the deployment of weapons becomes almost a 'special effect' of the virtual. And, as in all cinematic productions, only the most talented can use the best special effects or weapons. Commenting on the last Iraqi war, Baudrillard argued, "What we are watching as we sit paralysed in our fold-down seats isn't '*like* a film'; it *is* a film. With a script, a screenplay, that has to be followed unswervingly (Baudrillard,

2005b, p. 124). Today, conspiracy theorists use a similar jargon to argue the distortion of 'reality'. But the truth is that nobody needs the director and the production manager—this would have been the Americans back then. The "cinematic being" of warfare (*Ibid.*) has been interiorised by anyone, so speaking of distortion and manipulation makes no sense—the war is cinematographic *and* brutal, with supremely real and violent effects, with no contradiction between these two aspects. Everyone manipulates and distorts fragments of this 'script'. The soldier on the ground sets the timer before posing as he fires an artillery shot. The social media user in Western Europe distributes the images with an obligatory comment of support or indignation. The ultra-reality of crude experiences corresponds to the ultra-reality of conscience-clearing,

In any case, the concept of information, too, has become obsolete: typically, the news media recycle user-generated images that have already circulated extensively. We must look for the sense of current information in a different operation. Indeed, those contents already come 'pre-formed' (pre-shaped) by the medium — both the social media fixed formats and the heavily AI-aided smartphone images testify to this. Somehow, we could say that an automatic pre-forming counterbalances the openness of contents. The latter is also algorithmically empowered by the abundance of the former.

> "The Internet merely simulates a free mental space, a space of freedom and discovery. In fact, it merely offers a multiple but conventional space, in which the operator interacts with known elements, pre-existent sites, established codes. Nothing exists beyond its search parameters. Every question has an anticipated response assigned to it. You are the questioner and, at the same time, the automatic answering device of the machine. Both coder and decoder — you are, in fact, your own terminal" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 81).

This suggests that, in our age, *in-forming* looks more and more like its literal meaning: it gives an automatically codified form to any content.

Heidegger used to say that "information" precludes us from seeing "the *forma*, the essence, and the proper character of the being of things", rendering it difficult "to let phenomena speak for themselves" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 58). The singular form of the event's emergence, which includes information, disappears into the integral version of the events. The result is that information, with the excuse of the 'fulfilled democracy' of the contents, passes off the pre-codified form of the event for an unfiltered reproduction[65]. Its decisive operation lies in disappearing from the whole picture to

---

[65] And we all well know that the most insidious deceptions online are found in the 'no filter' contents.

mask the disappearance of the phenomena's 'voice' Heidegger talks about. As Baudrillard, analysing the state of our language, highlighted, "we live in a world where the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear and, at the same time, to mask that disappearance" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 5).

All of this works all the more smoothly for its automatism without a centre, rendering this operation the actual *immediate* element. "The virtuality of war is not, then, a metaphor. It is the literal passage from reality into fiction or rather the immediate metamorphosis of the real into fiction" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 124). The virtuality of war, we could add, corresponds to its virality, to the forced consumption and circulation of images we all adjust to. This suggests that the operational instrument, "the terminal" of this faceless operation is, first of all, our bodies. Denouncing this automated encoding-decoding is entirely absurd when it happens without constraints and controls. What it signals is a transformation already occurred inside our bodies.

> "Virtual and viral go hand in hand. It is because the body itself has become a non-body, a virtual machine, that viruses are taking it over" (Baudrillard, 1993c, p. 63)

This also means that through the virality of events, human beings reinforce their own virtuality. Events are utilised to disappear into a more reassuring version of the world which, for its part, plunges more and more into uncertainty and undecidability. The transfusion of virtuality and factuality, as much as the undecidability between what is a human body and what is a device (Baudrillard, 1993c, p. 57), is bound to produce further extreme phenomena and increase uncertainty. We hope to be protected — screened — from what we contribute to.

In effect, this hyper-interactive media coverage 'covers', first of all, the "radical uncertainty" of the current world (Gane, 2000) to which, at the same time, it contributes. The integral transfusion of "the virtual and the eventful [*le virtuel et l'événementiel*]" (Baudrillard, 2004c) is made disappear by endless informing and fact-checking, which is only the other side of the coin.

The automatic thought, the 'artificial intelligence' of the event, is the elimination of ambiguity—of the singularity of what is—and the illusion that the coverage is the faithful reproduction of the event. It might be partial, perfectible, and so on, but it is believed to be the potential representation of the event. On the contrary, its virtually realised disappearance becomes the event itself. This might be the current *script*, the tacit *diktat* of Integral Reality: do whatever you want as long as you exchange images, as long as you participate in "the dictatorship of forced exchange" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 44) — as long as you help to make the world disappear.

> "Explanation is always an alibi. The search for causes is always a denial of the event as such" (Baudrillard, 2001a, pp. 176–177)

Ceronetti wrote: "In order to grasp something of it, all history must be inscribed in the symbolic" (Ceronetti, 2014, p. 46). This idea condenses Baudrillard's attitude towards the phenomena he analysed, distinguishing him from other similar commentators.

In the years preceding and following September 11, Baudrillard drew a clear distinction between two kinds of events: those containing a symbolic stake and those in which this stake is absent. We have plenty of "world events", and they are often "violent, real events, from wars right through to genocides" (Baudrillard, 2003c, p. 3). But it is not sufficient for an event to exist, be real, or be inscribed in a symbolic dimension. The fact that an event gains global coverage does not tell us anything *per se*. A symbolic event is only one in which some radical challenge is at stake: "events that represent a setback for globalization itself", summarises Baudrillard in 2002 (*Ibid.*).

We must return to the original definition of symbolic exchange to fully understand this.

> "The symbolic is neither a concept, an agency, a category, nor a 'structure', but an act of exchange and *a social relation which puts an end to the real*, which resolves the real, and, at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 133).

A symbolic event is an event without equivalent, singular, which—in its ambiguity—restores reversibility in place of the apparent irreversibility of the global system. It is a challenge to integral reality, which, on the contrary, automatically codifies everything—after all, what does not have a digital equivalent, at least virtually speaking?

Did coronavirus represent a reversion and setback of the world system or, rather, a definitive consecration? This is the central symbolic question.

The ambiguity of the virus immediately complicates the answer but also signals a symbolic element. The late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century Viennese author Arthur Schnitzler, cited by Baudrillard, writes that between the microbe and the human, we observe the exact relationship between the human and the divine. One transcends the other, and the 'lower race' struggles to destroy the higher one, thanks to which it lives (Schnitzler, 1967, p. 177; quoted in Baudrillard, 1993c, pp. 161–162). Baudrillard concludes that "there exists a total symbiosis and a radical incompatibility" between microbes and humans. The two are not essentially opposed or confront each other on the plan of reality. Instead, the ambivalence of their identities means that "we share the same destiny" (*Ibid.*, p. 163) and are symbolically bound. In other words, the destiny of the virus is tied to ours: it is sufficient to remember that a deadlier infection corresponds to a more certain death of the virus, which dies along with the infected organism. The

challenge of the virus would remind that of a kamikaze terrorist: for Baudrillard, that was indeed symbolic.

A realist differentiation, based on a face-to-face between two adversaries, becomes impossible. Indeed, we find ourselves in a situation similar to that of terrorist attacks. "Terrorism, like viruses, is everywhere. [...] We can no longer draw a demarcation line around it" (Baudrillard, 2003c, p. 10). And precisely from this ambiguity, a symbolic analysis can be envisioned. For instance, the same impossibility of demarcating the virus could be discovered in the generalised mistrust toward human beings—toward ourselves!—during the peak of the pandemic: "Fellow human beings, as in the plague described by Manzoni, are now seen only as potential anointers whom we must avoid at all cost", observed Agamben (Agamben, 2021d). This signals that thanks to the virus, something essential was at stake in our societies.

Just as the virus does not confront the organism, the pandemic and similar phenomena are not unfortunate eventualities which occur to a system like ours, as if they were exceptions to its functioning. On the contrary, the virus is an element that lives inside our system and simultaneously issues a life-or-death challenge to it.

We can better understand this situation by considering the response to the viral outbreak. An adversary on the terrain of the real, facing the system as something distinguished from it, could have been isolated and fought without putting the system's entire life at stake. The world system could have faced down "any visible antagonism", so much that it always attempts to find one (think of all the Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein of recent history). However, "against the other kind" of antagonism, "which is viral in structure — as though every machinery of domination secreted its own counter-apparatus, the agent of its own disappearance — against that form of almost automatic reversion of its own power, the system can do nothing" (*Ibid.*, pp. 10-11). The strategy adopted by the system was undoubtedly directed against itself: once more, a strategy of disappearance.

The Shutdown: A Spectacle of Disappearance

> "Have we not always had the deep-seated phantasy of a world that would go on without us? The poetic temptation to see the world in our absence, free of any human, all-too-human will?" (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 52)

> "And isn't it strange that certain individuals have seemed to accept the shutdown, the burnout? Is this something that they've always longed for, subliminally, subatomically?" (DeLillo, 2020, p. 78)

> "Welcome to the viral desert" (Žižek, 2020, p. 37)

One of the most interesting phenomena of the viral years was the shutdown of our societies, which were transformed into deserts within a few days of the outbreak. Spectral cities where wild animals returned to wander, social and work activities interrupted and migrated onto domestic screens, a general atmosphere of suspicion and uncertainty.

Did Baudrillard imagine this when, in his pages on the American desert, he wrote that he "sought the finished form of the future catastrophe of the social in geology"? (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 5). In effect, a few things have finally come to the surface in a more finished, catastrophic form. Virtual communications, already considered the future of work and sociality, were encouraged and even imposed as the only possible form of interaction. The appeal of 'remote work' increased compared to the obsolete one of the 'office'. Digital identification with certified immunisation became the norm to partake in what remained of social life.

Nothing was new. Even Baudrillard acknowledged it then: "I knew all about this nuclear form, this future catastrophe when I was still in Paris, of course. But to understand it, you have to take the road, to that travelling which achieves what Virilio calls the aesthetics of disappearance" (*Ibid.*). To understand the catastrophe of the social, we had to take the road of the virus and observe our disappearance unfolding before our eyes. It was more than what Baudrillard could have foreseen. For him, the invisible "social desertification" found its "contemplative form" in the materiality of the desert (*Ibid.*). The spectacle of that desertification was finally revealed as a last bonus performance. The desert took over the entirety of society.

Therefore, it was not necessary to travel to America anymore: we stopped being "the dubbed or subtitled version" and accessed "the original version of modernity" that America was in Baudrillard's eyes (*Ibid.*, p. 76). Or perhaps, as members of the global circuit, we all went even further down the promenade of disappearance.

In one of his last short stories, Ballard describes what appears to be the earth from which human beings have disappeared. After the reception of apparent emergency signals, travellers from another galaxy land on an "obscure planet" and go in search of its inhabitants to rescue them. But what they find, in an atmosphere "still more than adequate to support life", are only deserted cities, suburbs, silent airports and highways (Ballard, 2009, p. 1185).

The experience of travelling across our societies was analogous: leaving the domestic galaxy, our new living site, we would only encounter the intact remnants of a previous life. During the journey, most of us would have probably believed that what we saw was an exceptional landscape, a provisionally deserted society which would be soon re-populated—more or less what happens to the exemplars of endangered species, which are occasionally taken into captivity to head off their extinction? "They will invent human zoos; protect us perhaps, like any endangered species, and make us the heroes

of children's fictions" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 3). The problem is the same encountered by "engendered species": before they are released back into the environment, "'the wild' has disappeared!". After being "recycled in human isolation cells", humans "are later released back into social life". However, "in the meantime […] the social environment has disappeared!" (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 26).

Similarly, Ballard's story takes a more sinister turn. As in our case, what still functions, even more than before, is the vast computer network. From there, the astronauts discover the alarm was transmitted (where have we received ours, if not from the screens?). After an investigation, having found no inhabitants, they discover that the computer networks themselves had sent the alert of an "imminent threat", concerned that "the existence of these people", whom Ballard compares to a "virulent plague" (!), "was about to overwhelm their planet". The truth is quickly revealed: these people had invented an "interiorised version of their television screens, a virtual replica of reality", which they started to prefer to the world. At this point, the computers locked them down inside this artificial illusion and later developed a nostalgia for "their former companions", eventually idealised in the figure of an invented God (Ballard, 2009, pp. 1184–1186).

When we transpose it to the present, we may imagine being on all sides of this novella. To an extent, we were the travellers, discovering a 'planet' we had never seen before. We could find no traces of physical upheaval apart from the sounds of the sirens rushing along in the cities — an apparent peace which fascinated many. At the same time, it disguised many operations to make all pain and violence disappear: among the most interesting, the absolute isolation of the ill and the management of the dead.

Some were tempted to see in this, as Agamben did, the crossing of "the threshold between humanity and barbarism" (Agamben, 2021d). If an early modern thinker like Vico considered the burial of the dead among the "three common senses of mankind" (Vico, 2002, p. 10), the conclusion appears reasonable. Conversely, others saw in this and other practices an example of human heroism, an increased intensity that gave life sense under these circumstances. Speaking of the healthcare workers, Žižek wrote a sentence which might sound more ambiguous and tragicomical than intended: "Many of them have died, but *till they died, they were alive*" (Žižek, 2021, p. 171).

Perhaps the problem lies entirely elsewhere. If this and other practices have appeared painfully justified, the 'catastrophe'—whether good or bad—has long preceded this emergency time. A few years ago, Ceronetti reflected on the exact theme of the speedy burials under more 'normal' circumstances. The need to swiftly get rid of it reveals that the dead is equalised to a thing:

> "Do the burials of the day after death — hasty rituals, reduced to a minimum, mobile phone paternosters, abolished the vigil, a run from a fridge to the cemetery — still deserve the name of funerals, exequies, etc.? They simply throw us away; not a breath of *pietas*. Of all the

accelerations, this is one of the strongest in brutality and iniquity"
(Ceronetti, 2014, p. 20)

If this is true, Agamben had to be more radical: the threshold had been crossed already, and the seed of exception was planted within 'normality'—as he taught us (Agamben, 2005). At the same time, and precisely because of the coherence of these manifestations, we cannot reduce the event of coronavirus to something accidental. Instead, it can be considered as an expression of the system in which its logic is condensed in its fullness and extremeness:

> "The high degree to which AIDS, terrorism, crack cocaine or computer viruses mobilize the popular imagination should tell us that they are more than anecdotal occurrences in an irrational world. The fact is that they contain within them the whole logic of our system: these events are merely the spectacular expression of that system. They all hew to the same agenda of virulence and radiation, an agenda whose very power over the imagination is of a viral character" (Baudrillard, 1993c, p. 67).

If this was not the case, how could people have been so indifferent, as Agamben does not seem to explain? They might not have been indifferent as much as ambivalent—worried and fascinated by something at the same time familiar and unimaginable. This is always the case when the event is simultaneously unpredictable and paradigmatic of the system in which we live. The "mix of jubilation and terror, of secret elation and remorse" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 134) reflects our ambivalent desire for something to happen and, simultaneously, for things to remain the same.

With this dichotomy in mind, we must now question how integral reality's destiny is taking shape. Can the events we describe prefigure the revolt of singular forms, and will these forms be human? Or, as the return to reinforced normality indicates, is the algorithm of integral reality increasingly becoming implacable, learning automatically from the singular events that sacrificed themselves? And where do these scenarios leave radical thought, even in its most extreme Baudrillardian version? As we ask these questions, we examine both the prospects of the world and those of Baudrillard.

ULTIMATE OR PENULIMATE PROSPECTS[66]? CYBERHEGEMONY AND ITS VIRTUALITY

Introduction

This final chapter aims to develop the ultimate horizons of Baudrillard's theory and ask whether they are conclusive. As I have shown, his works after *Fatal Strategies* reiterate the same idea of an ineliminable dualism at the heart of the current situation. The process of integral realisation of the world continues and, although interrupted, does not appear to be stoppable. Conversely, the more it becomes extreme, the more singularities seem to rise against it — this would be what Baudrillard interprets as the passage of radicalism into things. This conjunction produces the question of whether Integral Reality is irreversible and, if not, what comes next. The chapter assumes this question as its guiding principle and examines all the passages where Baudrillard crashes into this dead point in his late works.

---

[66] *"In prosody, the term 'paroxytone', the literal equivalent of which in Latin is the penultimate, refers to the syllable before the last. The paroxysm might thus be said to be the penultimate moment, that is to say not the final moment but the moment just before the end, just before there's nothing more to be said"* (Baudrillard, 1998a, p. v)

> "It is at the outer limits of this systematic disappearance, which has, it would seem, been universally accepted, but whose dynamic ultimately remains mysterious (What do digital sheep dream of? as Philip K. Dick might have asked), that some troubling paradoxical questions arise" (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 63).

In the last chapter, I would like to deal with Baudrillard's farewell, that is, with the outcomes of his theoretical and human vicissitudes. I am not so much talking about chronology and biology, for which it would suffice to recall his death after the cancer that struck him in March 2007. For Baudrillard, existence was "the least of things" (Baudrillard, 2003c, p. 68), and even biological death had no significance and consequence in itself, as it only "comes down to biological chance" (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 24). It was the symbolic horizon that, according to him, really mattered: the one in which games were decided and destiny configured. He constantly repeated that inventing an art of disappearance was necessary, learning how to pass "from one form to another" and accomplish one's metamorphosis (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 44).

All this is perfectly consistent with his Heraclitean conviction that the proper (so far as it is inevitable) trajectory of things lies in appearing and disappearing. This, and not "to exist and survive", is our "fundamental destiny" (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 213). In fact, it is arrogance or hybris (as a Greek would have said) to delude oneself that one can stop this game of appearances and disappearances. There is no greater sin, for those who recognise this symbolic-metaphysical order, than that of the players who believe themselves to be greater than the game itself. Nevertheless, that is the arrogance of integral reality, which aims to install its own irreversible horizon in the place of becoming and reversibility. Incidentally, this dilemma between reversibility and irreversibility, which has marked Baudrillard's entire journey, returns and explodes overbearingly in this final phase. Let us see, then, how the games played out.

How Baudrillard and his theory disappear is interesting for us precisely because in it the fate of theory as such seems to be at stake. Indeed, if the hypothesis of this thesis holds, namely that Baudrillard would be a revelatory object for our epoch as Nietzsche was, according to Heidegger, for his, the limits of Baudrillard's thought signal to us the limits of our thought and our reality. This, again, does not stem from Baudrillard's supernatural or prophetic capacities but from the condensation in his thinking of essential questions. A summation of these questions appears in his very last text:

> "1. Is everything doomed to disappear—or, more precisely, hasn't everything already disappeared? (which connects up with the very distant paradox from a philosophy that never was: WHY IS THERE NOTHING RATHER THAN SOMETHING?)
>
> 2. Why isn't everything universal?

3. We are fascinated by the phantasm of an integral reality, by the alpha and omega of digital programming. The real is the leitmotif and obsession of all discourses. But are we not far less fascinated by the real than by its vanishing, its ineluctable disappearance?

4. Which gives rise to the truly mysterious question: how does this irresistible global power succeed in undifferentiating the world, in wiping out its extreme singularity? And how can the world be so vulnerable to this liquidation, this dictatorship of integral reality, and how can it be fascinated by it—not exactly fascinated by the real but by the disappearance of reality? There is, however, a corollary to this: what is the source of the fragility of this global power, of its vulnerability to minor events, to events that are insignificant in themselves ('rogue events', terrorism, but also the pictures from Abu Ghraib, etc.)?

(Baudrillard, 2009, pp. 63–64)

It is precisely questions and doubts that characterise this last phase and that, just as well, will characterise this last section of the thesis. But is this not already a symptom of the failure of both? Here we are already addressing the most important question. In a world that already offers all automatic answers to any question, simply that there are questions does not mean much. However, that there are truly enigmatic questions that cannot be closed in an answer perhaps signifies the ultimate resistance of an irreducible thought and singularity. Baudrillard also posed the question in these equivalent terms, connecting this question to that of humanity:

"I think a form of vitality remains in every human being, something irreducible that resists, a singularity of a metaphysical order that goes even beyond political commitment — not that that commitment has been entirely eliminated. So we must look to the singular for the antidote to the global. I have to tell you, in fact, that if I weren't convinced that there's something in the human being that fights and resists, I'd quite simply have given up writing, since, in that case, writing would be just tilting at windmills. I'm firmly of the belief that this particular, irreducible element can't be universalised or globalised, that it can't be part of some standard form of exchange. Will human beings do something positive with it one day? We can't say. The issue's by no means decided. And that, in fact, is where I find scope for optimism . . ."
(Baudrillard, 2015, p. 194).

Indeed, this seems to be the only scope for optimism in the face of the prospect of an integral reality — and, seamlessly, the motivation for continuing writing and developing radical thought as Baudrillard envisioned it.

We have seen, however, that recent developments do not seem to be able to collapse the edifice of global reality. On the contrary, even the most violent stresses, such as

those of the coronavirus, seem to be leading to a horizon that is increasingly integrated, precisely when the most basic principles of human life are cast into doubt. Once more, this should pose the radical question of the non-coincidence of the latter with the integration process.

At the same time, all this happens with the full and convinced complicity of the majority of human beings, which makes us ponder whether we are witnessing a death drive at the level of the species or something else. Could this be, for instance, another drive humanity could have internalised — perhaps that of "*technology* [Technik]" once it has become the "*subject of history*, with which we are only co-historical" (Anders, 1980, p. 9)? And was this outcome already implied by the idea of humanity itself?

We must unravel this ambiguity and ask the question most extremely, considering the hypothesis of another strategy we have not contemplated. Human beings seem to strive, without being forced to, for their disappearance and that of the world through technological purification. Could this be a sign that they, as a species, see this as a form of salvation? Can technology, which exterminates the singularity of the world and humans, turn out to be surprisingly salvific? Is it in this sense that we are to interpret Heidegger's phrase repeated by Baudrillard that "When we look into the ambiguous essence of technology, we behold the constellation, the stellar course of the mystery" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 33; Baudrillard, 2000b, pp. 81–82)? The hypotheses concerning these enigmas animate the last, equally enigmatic phase of Baudrillard's thought.

9/11 and the Spectres of Baudrillard's Thought

> "This is the very definition of an event: when an illegible, long-running process becomes legible at a given moment by the force of an unprecedented act" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 122).
>
> "The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast — as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 473).
>
> "[…] perhaps it is only when something has passed and has seen its time that it becomes truly interesting" (Agamben, 2018a, p. 6)"

In 1980, Günther Anders defined the epoch inaugurated in 1945 as "the *final one*" (Anders, 1980, p. 20). Indeed, since humanity had reached the point of producing the possibility of its destruction using the atomic bomb, this implied an insuperable horizon. In other words, our time can only unfold in two ways. If it brings to completion the possibilities that have been opened up, there will be no further epochs, so this will be the final time. Conversely, delaying the actualisation of these possibilities will leave us stuck in this era, devoid of the possibility of overcoming it. In short, for Anders, overcoming our era would mean exterminating ourselves, making it impossible to overcome it:

> "*The epoch of epoch changes has been over since 1945*. Now we live in an era that is no longer a transitory epoch before others, but a '*deadline*' during which our being is without pose nothing other than a '*just-yet-being*'" (Anders, 1980, p. 20).

Anders's writings become increasingly important and are quoted in Baudrillard's late phase, particularly in the short essays that constitute his last texts (e.g. Baudrillard, 2009, p. 16, 2010b, p. 81). We have already seen that the theme of endlessness also characterises Baudrillard's earlier thinking. But in the last phase, the insuperability and definitiveness of the present age take on further significance and become even more pressing. It almost seems as if Baudrillard, who in these years experiences the much-analysed interminability of cancer on his own skin, feels in a new and even more overpowering way the irreversibility of the present configuration. This makes Mike Gane, one of the greatest connoisseurs of Baudrillard, say that his thought even went through "a period of crisis" in the very last years of his life, after the publication of his last monograph *L'Intelligence du Mal* in 2004 (Gane, 2017, p. 301). For Gane, this crisis consists in the waning of Baudrillard's optimism, which arguably consisted in the conviction that the symbolic order — the reversibility of any value — is destined to prevail over the order of reality — the law of value — which only provisionally appears to supplant it (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 1)[67]. This approach can be applied to Baudrillard's entire oeuvre, at least since *Symbolic Exchange* of 1976 (*Ibid.*). At its core is the conviction, repeated several times in this thesis as well, that any order and any power eventually meet their reversion, that in every attempt at realist accumulation lies the germs of its symbolic undoing. The reality of everything would be threatened by this reversion coming from what it suppresses — "the symbolic haunts modern social institutions in the form of their own death" (*Ibid.*).

This hypothesis seems to find exemplary confirmation in 9/11, which finally breaks the "strike of events" (Baudrillard, 1994b) and seems to materialise this blowback, that is, the revenge of that other world that undauntedly resists global integration. In the towers, Baudrillard sees the collapse of this system by the hand of an evil whose very

---

[67] By this, Baudrillard means that the reality of any value is haunted by its inevitable reversion, which puts an end to it. "Everywhere, in every domain, a single form predominates: reversibility, cyclical reversal and annulment put an end to the linearity of time, language, economic exchange, accumulation and power. Hence the reversibility of the gift in the counter-gift, the reversibility of exchange in the sacrifice, the reversibility of time in the cycle, the reversibility of production in destruction, the reversibility of life in death, and the reversibility of every term and value of the langue in the anagram. In every domain it assumes the form of extermination and death, for it is the form of the symbolic itself. Neither mystical nor structural, the symbolic is inevitable" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 2)

appearance it provoked, reducing, as we have seen, the spaces of antagonism and singularity until their extremist transformation into terrorism:

> "It is the system itself which created the objective conditions for this brutal retaliation. By seizing all the cards for itself, it forced the Other to change the rules" (Baudrillard, 2003c, p. 9).

Otherness now only presents itself in the form of extreme terrorist phenomena. For Baudrillard, this is the responsibility of the system and its unlimited integration, technological purification and security-driven prophylaxis. From Baudrillard's point of view, otherness and evil cannot be eliminated. In a context that does not allow for the existence of lesser forms of evil and antagonism, they assume their maximal form. With a metaphor, we could say that where the dam of reality diminishes the holes from which the fluid of evil can escape, the latter will erupt at exponential pressure. "The more concentrated the system becomes globally, ultimately forming one single network, the more it becomes vulnerable at a single point", writes Baudrillard in *The Spirit of Terrorism* (*Ibid.*, p. 8).

Against the system that coincides with the highest expansion of reality and the lowest expansion of otherness — this is what global integration means — the terrorists embody the most extreme form of otherness, which is that of death. According to the rules of *potlatch* and symbolic exchange, the only possible response to death is another death. There is no way to raise the stakes, which can only be evened out. That is why Baudrillard wrote, "Perhaps death and death alone, the reversibility of death, belongs to a higher order than the code", by which he meant the metaphysical structure of integral reality. "Only symbolic disorder can bring about an interruption in the code", which is otherwise virtually omnipotent. Therefore, precisely in this omnipotence and hegemonic expansion of the system, the only, inevitably terroristic, possibility of reversion is found. "Every system that approaches perfect operativity simultaneously approaches its downfall", he wrote on the same page in 1976 (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 4). The event of the Twin Towers seemed to materialise this idea because, by collapsing on themselves rather than exploding from the inside, they seemed to respond 'suicidally' to the kamikazes' suicide — exactly like in the symbolic exchange of the *potlatch*.

> "The symbolic collapse of a whole system came about by an unpredictable complicity, as though the towers, by collapsing on their own, by committing suicide, had joined in to round off the event" (Baudrillard, 2003c, p. 8)

In this perspective, Baudrillard did not believe that the West — as much as "any power incapable of bearing the spectre of opposition", of which "America" is only "the allegory or the universal figure" (*Ibid.*, p. 63) — could respond on the symbolic level. Effectively, the wars that followed seemed to confirm that 'our' capacity to intervene at the level of reality could not overcome that event *symbolically*.

167

But the global order's response soon reveals the ambiguity of this event, which we might compare to that observed with the pandemic. The terrorists lay "their lives and deaths [...] on the line", theoretically offering the ultimate sacrificial 'object' in the order of symbolic exchange. For its part, the only object the West can sacrifice is "everything by which a human being retains some value in his own eyes". Baudrillard means by this the de-sacralization and "in-differentiation of values", which characterises "the whole movement of our culture" (Baudrillard, 2010a, pp. 22–23). The indifference to values and the symbolic order is epitomised precisely by the swift *return to normality* — a rhetoric we all well know — that followed the 9/11 attacks. An incapacity to respond or an unforeseeable symbolic response?

Weeks after the attack, Philippe Muray, a satirical French writer picked up by Baudrillard in these late texts, wrote a sarcastic letter of 'consolation' addressed to the jihadists. On 9/11, Muray affirms, the jihadists disturbed what he calls our irrevocable "anthropological regression", hidden behind the rhetoric of rights and the interminable entertainment offered by Western societies:

> "Our universal values are racing and screaming across the planet, and we are raining down the manna of wonderful *rights* on it [...] as we destroy at the same time all the borders, all the limits, as we illuminate all the shadowy zones, as we hunt down the last secrets, the last unspoken desires, and democratize the last recalcitrant peoples with transparency and depression bombs" (Muray, 2016, pp. 9–10, my translation).

In sum, as they aim at Western civilisation, the jihadists are "the first victims of our propaganda". That civilisation does not exist, definitely not in the symbolic sense that the terrorists have in mind when they denounce the indecency of our values. What exists is an immense exercise of indifference and indifferentiation of the world, of eradication of any difference: in fact, globalisation is the neutralisation of the world, of its singularities. "There is not any world anymore", writes Muray, and this is the result of our "profound secularising, seducing, de-sacralising, obscenising and mercantilising tendencies" (*Ibid.*). Our values, mistaken by the jihadists as symbolic ones, are a disguise for an underlying process of destruction of any singularity through a single generalised code, in which everything becomes neutral and indifferent.

Baudrillard repeats Muray's concepts: "Our truth", the truth of "unveiling, de-sublimation, [...] exhibition, [...] confession, [...] laying bare", implies that nothing "is true if it is not de-sacralized, objectivized, shorn of its aura, dragged on to the stage" (Baudrillard, 2010a, p. 23). With a joke in an interview, he clarifies in what sense our values are "simulated": "What is freedom? We have a choice between buying one car and buying another car? It's a simulation of freedom" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 182). Once more, we may think how the only way we know to 'liberate' discriminated people is to produce even more categorisations and labels, reducing linguistic expressions to limited terms institutionally defined as 'correct' — the *correction* of the singularity of language is

inseparable from the *correction* of the human being, with all the ambiguity of this term. I must add that the opposite vindication of 'political incorrectness' as always legitimate is an equally fraudulent operation and participates in the same process of humiliation.

With this in mind, Muray continues:

> "Dear Jihadists, it is necessary for you to get this unprecedented truth into your heads: all that is still active on our continents is plotting day and night to lose what is left of the human being" (*Ibid.*, p. 26).

As Baudrillard also pointed out, "*Our* [only] potlatch is one of baseness, shamelessness, obscenity, debasement and abjection" (Baudrillard, 2010a, p. 22). However, his view initially differed from Muray's conclusion that the West would have won since "we are the deadest" (Muray, 2016, p. 95). Baudrillard sees two types of death at issue: "Our death is an extinction, an annihilation" and contains, as such, no "symbolic stake". "Herein lies our poverty" as opposed to the symbolic superiority of all singularities: "When a singularity throws its own death into the ring, it escapes this slow extermination, it dies its own natural death" (Baudrillard, 2003c, p. 65). This quote is significant as it condenses Baudrillard's long-standing conviction that there is a limit to our system's capacity for extermination. This conviction becomes increasingly doubted — the essay *Hypotheses on Terrorism* was initially written in 2002.

On the Mortification of Death: Did Baudrillard Underestimate Reversibility?

> "I do not exist therefore I am" (Bene, 2002, p. 995)

> "[…] for what is there beyond death? We may, however, take the view that, at the highest level, at the height of the confrontation, a more general and even more radical form of reversibility is in play, which means that no form — not even the highest — escapes reversion or the victorious substitution of another form, as in the game of 'scissors, paper, stone'" (Baudrillard, 2010a, p. 27).

The paradigm of the West's response to the terrorists' suicide was, for Baudrillard, the episodes of Abu Ghraib. In *War Porn* from 2004, the episodes of torture and pornography inflicted by American soldiers on Iraqi prisoners constitute the specular image of 9/11. The latter was a "humiliation inflicted on power, but from the outside"; instead, Abu Grahib is "the humiliation, symbolic and completely fatal, which the world power inflicts on itself" (Baudrillard, 2004d, p. 205). Its "abject scenographies […] are an answer, beyond all the strategic and political adventures, to the humiliation of September 11th", an answer Baudrillard defines as "even worse than death" (*Ibid.*, p. 208).

Having said this, in Baudrillard's unsparing reading, the fatality still falls ultimately on the West:

> "[...] the prisoner threatened with electrocution and, completely
> hooded, like a member of the Ku Klux Klan, crucified by its ilk. It is really
> America that has electrocuted itself" (*Ibid.*, p. 209).

The suicide of the West continues and reaches its apex in this image. We get to the decisive point where, in the essay *Carnival and Cannibal*, Baudrillard's doubts reshuffle the cards, asking whether "the stakes of indifference and dishonour" are equal "to those of death" (Baudrillard, 2010a, p. 25). The question seems to become less and less rhetorical, casting into doubt death as the ultimate horizon of symbolic exchange.

In all these essays, Baudrillard does not doubt that this peculiar response — "a potlatch by lack" — aims to counterbalance the "potlatch by excess (that of death)" which terrorist events (including coronavirus) present us with (*Ibid.*, p. 26). Baudrillard derives this from Boris Groys's essay on Abu Grahib, included in the *Cahier* dedicated to him by the publisher *L'Herne* (Groys, 2004). But since *Carnival and Cannibal*, first appeared in that same book, the doubts about the degree of this counterchallenge multiply (as noticed by Gane, 2017). "But is this a genuine symbolic response to the terrorists' challenge?" Baudrillard asks, seemingly admitting a possible reversal of the affairs (Baudrillard, 2010a, p. 25).

The ambivalent answer could be that the West, after admitting "a total incapacity to respond symbolically to the challenge of death", surprisingly found out that the limit of death was not absolute, discovering an ultimate resource. At that point, it set "shame and mortification" against death (*Ibid.*) — by the way, in Latin, 'to mortify' is literally 'to make dead'. We could interpret this move in this way: *the only way to defeat the unsurpassable power of death is to make it irrelevant, to virtually neutralise it* (in the same way we virtually neutralise any other singularity). If something is already virtually (symbolically) dead, death can no longer defeat it. The extermination of death we have talked about might have this *sui generis* symbolic role: to make even the sacrificial death only a senseless biological event, an event that symbolically(!) changes nothing. *The extermination of the symbolic as our symbolic challenge?*

> "If we cannot lay our lives on the line, this is because we are already
> dead. And it is this indifference and abjection that we throw out to the
> others as a challenge" (*Ibid.*, p. 23).

By its pornographic exhibition and unveiling, even death is "de-sacralized, objectivized" and "shorn of its aura" (*Ibid.*). The mortal challenge paraphrasable as 'try to die like us' becomes the mortifying challenge 'try to be deader than us'. In a sense, this raises the stakes, as it challenges the rest of the world to sacrifice even their last symbolic resource, death. The West might have found a *sui generis* symbolic superiority in sacrificing any symbolic resource left — a sinister twist of fate revealing a tragicomical fatal strategy for Baudrillard's thought. Did he take his hypotheses too seriously? Further in the text, the impasse emerges in full:

> "[The West] is not able to respond to death with death or, most importantly, to raise the stakes and make a response that goes beyond it — for what is there beyond death? We may, however, take the view that, at the highest level, at the height of the confrontation, a more general and even more radical form of reversibility is in play, which means that no form — not even the highest — escapes reversion or the victorious substitution of another form, as in the game of 'scissors, paper, stone'. [...] perhaps even by its opposite or caricature. [...] This is the game. Matters are never definitively settled." (*Ibid.*, pp. 27-28).

This surprise might appear odd. Did Baudrillard confuse death as a symbolic form, putting an end to the reality of things, with a real event? Did he go against his idea that "Death ought never to be understood as the real event that affects a subject or a body, but as a *form* in which the determinacy of the subject and value is lost" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 5)? More precisely, Baudrillard seems to have conceived that death as a symbolic challenge might have effectuated a real event, a real reversion of the system. For the first time, he admits, he radically doubts this hypothesis. This is perhaps one of the most interesting quotes we find in the late Baudrillard, as it discloses a wholly different (theoretical?) perspective coinciding, for him, with a worse kind of scenario:

> "Having said this, to contemplate the idea that a global power, which is, after all, a form of self-abasement and universal abasement, may nevertheless constitute a power of defiance, a power of response to the challenge from the other world — that is to say, ultimately, a symbolic power — means for me a drastic [literally a 'harrowing'] revision, a casting into the balance of what I have always thought (which has always had the revolt and the final victory of Borges's 'Fauna of Mirrors' as its horizon). But perhaps we have to resign ourselves to the idea that even reversibility, as a weapon of mass seduction, is not the absolute weapon; and that it is confronted with something irreversible — in what we may just discern today as a worse kind of ultimate prospect" (Baudrillard, 2010a, p. 28).

The idea of the mirror people is borrowed from one of Borges's short stories, where "the defeated peoples are condemned by the empire to be imprisoned behind mirrors". From then on, "they merely reflect the image of their conquerors". Baudrillard sees in this a paradigm of everything which disappears behind a representation, of every singularity — we can paraphrase — integrated into the architecture of reality. Something, the world in its singularity, disappears "behind every image, behind every representation, behind every concept" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 111). This is an old idea of Baudrillard, for whom "[...] the sign always effaces the thing" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. 4) as its "function is always a conjuring — both a conjuring up and a conjuring away: causing something to emerge in order to capture it in signs (forces, reality, happiness, etc.) and evoking something in order to deny and repress it" (Baudrillard, 1998b, p. 33). For this reason, he argues that "representation is a slave condition" and that only the hope of shattering its mirror can mean freedom — another statement with potentially enormous

consequences for the emancipatory discourses we hear in current times. The hope Baudrillard confessed to always having had was that, like in the fable, the slaves of representation would have one day begun "to resemble" their conquerors "less and less" to finally "pass through to the other side of the mirror and invade the Empire…" (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 111). In linguistic terms, this is the hope that signs, concepts, and images, once achieved their utmost abstraction, the point at which they lose any likeness and reflective capacity, would have finally appeared just singular — which means things among things:

> "The sign, ceasing to be a sign, becomes once again a thing among things. That is to say, a thing of total necessity or absolute contingency" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 68).

> "What is now happening before our eyes is that language, which was exteriorized as the thing— that is, according to etymology, the "cause"— par excellence of humanity, seems to have accomplished its anthropogenetic itinerary and want to go back to the nature from which it comes" (Agamben, 2018b, p. 13).

Incidentally, Vico predicted this as the returned barbarism, a "barbarism of reflection" characterised by the excess of linguistic abstraction but with the same confusion as the original barbarism (Vico, 1948, p. 381). This also led Nietzsche to affirm that "[w]e belong to an age whose civilization is in danger of perishing through the means to civilization" (Nietzsche, 1986, p. 182 modified translation). The same cyclical and reversible idea is repeated by Baudrillard, for whom "[e]ach apparent movement of history brings us imperceptibly closer to its antipodal point, if not indeed to its starting point" (Baudrillard, 1994b, p. 10). This return to the barbaric confusion would mean an actual implosion of the system of integral reality as the defeated singularities break through its mirror-screen.

What remains to be discussed is whether Baudrillard's revision means this will not happen. Is integral reality irreversible or is what we are witnessing just a detour within a broader process of reversibility?

Cyberhegemony: The Western God Works in Mysterious Ways

> "The '*Machine*': one does not escape from the *Machine*'s apparatus, not only on the assembly line. One is never out of the *Machine* even in loneliness, in love, in 'free' time, on holiday, etc." (Bene and Deleuze, 2012).

> "The term 'apparatus' designates that in which and through which, one realises a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being" (Agamben, 2009b, p. 11).

Continuing to argue that the world is increasingly homogenised and undifferentiated, that a single form of domination reigns in the face of the increasing conflicts exploding and looming at the horizon, seems counterintuitive and unfounded. How can that be claimed not only in the face of the invasion of Ukraine and the tensions between Russia and the West but even more so with the Taiwan Strait issue and a potential US-China conflict in mind (Miller, 2022)? The Chinese Minister for Foreign Affairs recently affirmed that "China's achievements 'bust the myth that modernisation is Westernisation'" (Davidson, 2023). And perhaps that is true: the fact that the West has been the 'modernising' agent for a long time does not allow us to make the equation immediately. Even if the power balances in today's world have changed, America did not dominate the scenario described by Baudrillard in the early 2000s either. America was not the subject but the main profiteer of "the same universal model", which, as the previous section showed, can at all times turn the US and the West into "the first victim" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 66).

The situation described by Baudrillard was incompatible with *domination* in the classical sense, where two or more adversaries face each other. For this reason, he "carefully" introduced the new password of *hegemony* to indicate that the whole configuration of power — and not merely its balance — had become different. In hegemony, "there are no longer dominator or dominated" but "the reality of networks, of the virtual and total exchange" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 33). Domination, as we have seen about other aspects of integral reality, becomes impossible. "HEGEMON" indicates "the one who commands, orders, leads and governs (and not the one who dominates and exploits)" (*Ibid*. p. 34). It means that a single, global "operational setup" is installed and that the different actors can, at most, gain the power to control it but not define it.

In this configuration, we do not even have the other side of those dominated: "consensus, be it voluntary or involuntary, replaces traditional servitude". This also occurs in the current forms of tech capitalism, where no one can acquire capitalistic power without subscribing to the logic of "calculation and integral exchange" (*Ibid.*) — which proves infinitely superior to the old-fashioned "hegemony of capital" (*Ibid.*, p. 37). Consenting to this impersonal hegemony is critical to acquiring any personal power, *which makes any powerful individual fundamentally powerless against the apparatus*. As Agamben highlights, the form of the "apparatus" delineates "a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being" (Agamben, 2009b, p. 11), that is, devoid of substantiality and subjectivity. Quite the contrary, it indicates a general *subjection*.

Not casually, Baudrillard points out, the term hegemony "brings us back to the literal meaning of the world 'cybernetic' (*Kubernetikè*, the art of governing)". The term's literal meaning should warn us that cybernetics is not a neutral instrument manipulated by the hegemonic order but, on the contrary, itself essentially governing. Cybernetics is, we

could say, the logical and practical face of hegemony which prescinds from the benefitting actors. We are not faced with a cybernetic hegemony but with an integral *cyberhegemony*: the '*hēgemōn'* and the '*kubernētēs'* indicate the same impersonal configuration. This has the crucial corollary that the logic of ordering things technologically precedes the political arrangements and the material, technological innovations that offer increasingly refined ways to operate that hegemony. In 1964, way before the advent of a digitally-powered integral reality, Heidegger already observed that "cybernetics" was "increasingly becoming the universal science" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 21). That the '*hegemon'* commands 'cybernetically' was not a contingent result but a destiny, the result of a fatal materialisation of a logic. Heidegger and Anders already observed this logic, and evidently, no event had the force to disrupt it. Today, the hegemony of cybernetics and a cyber-powered hegemony appears like a tautology. The consideration of one cannot prescind from that of the other. *Likewise, we cannot reject global hegemony without rejecting our cybernetic-filled existence.*

> "Contrary to domination, a hegemony of world power is no longer a dual, personal or real form of domination, but the domination of networks, of calculation and integral exchange" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 34)

Not casually, the dispute over Taiwan concerns the availability of the one resource that guarantees cybernetic power: semiconductors, also known as *chips*. The excuse that Taiwan is "a 'sacred' part of China" (Davidson, 2023) serves to claim a priority over that resource. But regardless of the motivation, the result would be the same: China would not overthrow the current power architecture. It would adopt these material resources to 'exercise' the same power to the detriment of the US and its other competitors, in no way challenging the idea of global cybernetic hegemony[68]. This reveals the solidarity between the technological order and the automatic governance of things, which does not need any anthropomorphic manipulation or secret conspiracy to function — the actors are, in this sense, replaceable.

---

[68] Baudrillard's remarks on the Vietnam war seem to remain valid: "[...] behind this simulacrum of fighting to the death and of ruthless global stakes, the two adversaries are fundamentally in solidarity against something else, unnamed, never spoken, but whose objective outcome in war, with the equal complicity of the two adversaries, is total liquidation. Tribal , communitarian, precapitalist structures, every form of exchange, of language, of symbolic organization, that is what must be abolished, that is the object of murder in war — and war itself, in its immense, spectacular death apparatus, is nothing but the medium of this process of the terrorist rationalization of the social-the murder on which sociality will be founded, whatever its allegiance, Communist or capitalist" (Baudrillard, 1994a; see also Gane, 2000, p. 42).

This might seem banal and, in no way, different from any other time in history. However, the cybernetic nature of hegemony does not only mean that sovereign power is exercised cybernetically, but that logic of governance is already defined. We have a 'cyber-sovereignty'. What Baudrillard said of the "virtual Europe" of 2005, "a caricature of global power [...] incapable of inventing a new rule for the game", holds for those who, today, have more chances to substitute "its American Big Brother" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 54). The winner of this dispute would only become the new executor of the hegemony, but not the actual 'hegemon', the commander, the subject which, as Anders would say, remains "*Technik*" itself (Anders, 1980, p. 9):

> "Everyone is caught up in the network and submits to this hegemony. Who benefits? We can no longer calculate in terms of benefits for one power or another. [...] We can sense the strategy but there is no one behind it. [...]" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 297)

This idea of "a pure activity of governance" without a subject (Agamben, 2009b, p. 11) perfectly aligns with the technocratic tendencies that we observed in the moments of emergency in recent history, such as those illustrated in the previous chapters. Experts intervene where politics has no power to respond — which should be considered a lack of respons-ibility only in the literal sense: politics is out of the game since it has no concrete ability to *respond*. Things are in the 'hands' of technology. As Agamben recently observed (2023b), we are in what Carl Schmitt called "the administrative state", where "men do not rule, nor are norms valid as something higher" but where "things administer themselves" (Schmitt, 2004, p. 5). The total interface of hegemony and cybernetics allows us to go even further than Agamben's consideration that "the commixture" might be "even more intimate and that legislative and administrative state, legislation and administration, constitution and government are essential and inseparable parts of a single system". In this situation, we cannot even think of "tactically playing one of the two elements against the other" (Agamben, 2023b). As Baudrillard anticipated in 1996, "virtuality virtualises politics as well: there will be no politics of virtuality, because politics has become virtual" (Baudrillard, 2015, p. 110).

This suggests that, with some possible variations, China or the US would continue integrating the world because their will to power is a will to be the cyber-executors of hegemony. If they challenged the cybernetic foundation of hegemony, subjecting it to other prerogatives, they would challenge their possibility to be hegemonic. So, why would any of these (downsized) superpowers want to do that? Returning to the Western 'potlatch of indifference' sketched above, this situation might still favour those people and powers ready to sacrifice their dignity and symbolic integrity for technological hegemony. However, for its competitors, defeating the West might imply absorbing its soul and losing theirs — precisely the way the West did before (Baudrillard, 2010a, p. 9).

The belief in the triumph of the West, which they want to substitute, might be the ultimate effect of Western propaganda on China, Russia and all those who denounce it

— a great example of *anamorphosis*: the Western form of hegemony has left its subject but has continued its process in other seemingly subjectless forms. But it still has its hegemony. After all, the general consensus observed by Baudrillard has never been more effective and automatic than in the last years. In the pandemic emergency, no directive was even needed as most countries implemented the same measures while politicians delegated all decisions to technocrats. This is a self-evident paradigm of the automatic governance guaranteed by our cyber-hegemony.

Any way we view it, a (good or evil) way out of integral reality does not appear to be on the horizon. On the contrary, it seems it could survive a possible defeat of its current leading actors — with the problematic outlook of the same hegemony devoid of the palliative of some simulacrum values that the West partially guarantees. In a 2005 interview, Baudrillard elaborated on this critical prospect in this way:

> "Certainly, many negative things can happen to the system, but it will always be an objective or objectal negativity related to the technology itself, not a symbolic irruption. I am afraid that this game remains internal to integral reality" (Baudrillard, 2010b, pp. 126–127).

With this awareness confirmed beyond the world Baudrillard saw, which, however, seems to remain the same world as his, the questions he asked remain open. The two essential ones are why everything has not already disappeared and why this disappearance fascinates us. The second one might seem more of an irrelevant question, but it arguably contains a principle of ambiguity in which a last glimmer of human singularity lies. Indeed, at least for Baudrillard, the 'weak' prerogatives of fascination and seduction did not appear applicable to machines:

> "What still distinguishes the functioning of human beings from that of machines [...] is the intoxication of functioning, of living — pleasure. [...] They [human beings] can make machines which move, work and calculate better than they do — but there is no technical extension of human pleasure, of the pleasure of being human. For that to occur, the machines would have to be able to invent human beings, or conceive of them. But it is too late for that. They can only be extensions of human beings — or destroy them" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 147).

With the final dilemma in mind, this brings us back to a 'minor' Baudrillard interested in those human all too human fragilities.

"It's All Not True! It's All for Show!": The Inaudible Voice of An Ironic Deviation

> "[Putin] asked one person if they liked it in Nevsky, to which the individual replied: 'Very much. It's a little piece of heaven we have here'. Someone appeared to shout 'It's all not true! It's all for show!' in the background of their conversation, which sparked a reaction

from his security. It wasn't clear from the video whether the heckler was identified" (Van Brugen, 2023).

"Any attempt at accumulation is ruined in advance by the void. Something in us disaccumulates unto death, undoes, destroys, liquidates, and disconnects so that we can resist the pressure of the real, and live. Something at the bottom of the whole system of production *resists the infinite expansion of production*-otherwise, we would all be already buried" (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 51)

On the 20th of March 2023, the Kremlin released a video showing Vladimir Putin driving a car in the streets of the Ukrainian city of Mariupol and greeting a handful of residents of an apartment block built by the Russians. At one point, a voice off-camera can be heard shouting in the background: "It's all not true! It's all for show" (Van Brugen, 2023). While the illusionistic nature of what comes from 'the other side' is evident to us, an equally dissenting voice whispering this message on 'our side' seems missing. Alternatively, perhaps, it became inaudible before the glare of over-information and the certainty that *we* do not have any problem — reinforced by folkloric denialist flooding talk shows or melancholic social media feeds, which, however, have nothing to do with the voice from Mariupol. Clearly, the sentence pronounced there and in the West is not the same: here, it is just another iteration of the banality of 'low-budget' conspiracies.

Although this could seem reassuring, it signals a subtler destruction of dissent by making it impossible, by making words equal to silence. We can call *technical* freedom of expression that which, in the West, guarantees that, by speaking, nothing happens to you. However, the point is that nothing at all happens, whatever is said — and, as Benjamin wrote, "that things are 'status quo' *is* the catastrophe" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 473). That nothing happens to us does not avoid the fact that the speaker, in turn, is reduced to nothing as a speaking being. In sum, there is no freedom of expression if the 'expresser' is annihilated — what Zizek would define as "the more refined conditioned of liberal censorship" (Žižek, 2002, p. 2). This 'technical', simply negative freedom reveals itself as serving the aforementioned technological hegemony: it exemplifies the falsity of the "value system" of global "technological power" hidden behind the rhetoric of "human rights" and "democracy" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 284), as it masks a tacit extermination.

Mike Gane pointed out that Baudrillard's "essential question" to "sociology and social theory" was precisely the following: "Is it not a fundamental trap to remain on the terrain of the real, or the revolution to come, or the dialectic, or the world-wide quest for human rights?" (Gane, 2000, p. 33). In the correspondence of good and evil, the fight on the realist terrain brings advantages with a hard price: the liquidation of the vital singularity of life that should be gained from them. We are in a situation much more serious than the harshest critics think: "the lone true perfect crime", as Baudrillard considered it (Baudrillard, 2011, p. 45). Put in Zizek's words, perhaps the certainty of our freedom is attributable to the lack of "the very language to express our unfreedom" (Žižek, 2002, p. 2): *the crime corresponds with reality and is, therefore, perfectly invisible as its coincides with visibility itself.*

177

Telemorphosis, a 2001 text about the first edition of *Loft Story*, the French *Big Brother*, returns to this crime and prefigures the final passage to hegemony with no way out, where "the screen is no longer the television screen" but "the screen of reality itself" (Baudrillard, 2011, pp. 49–50) :

> "No need to enter into the idea of the virtual double of reality, we are already there — the televisual universe is nothing more than a holographic detail of global reality" (*Ibid*., p. 5).

Rather than an experiment gone wrong, the "existential micro-situation" of "human molecules in a vacuum" was seen by Baudrillard as "a universal metaphor for the modern being" (*Ibid*., pp. 35-36). What allowed Baudrillard to draw these conclusions was considering that "if television has achieved this, we are the ones who wanted it" (*Ibid*, p. 29). In the later texts, Baudrillard asks what could induce us to throw ourselves into the technical liquidation of the world, so far as this liquidation also expels us from it. Are these the unwanted "consequences of getting what we had collectively asked for", where the "we", as Pettman suggests, acquires a problematically "ultra-absorbent utility" (Pettman, 2008, p. 8)? Behind the production of "a world from which human beings are excluded", "a world that is totally beyond our grasp", Baudrillard hypothesises, there might be a symbolic response to "the original crime" of "the existence of the world [...] without our having been consulted" (Baudrillard, 2010a, p. 86). Paraphrasing this, we could say that, so far as we do not have the symbolic means other cultures had to respond to the gift of the world — or, perhaps because we have found a more effective one — we banalise it, rendering it innocuous. However, this has the lethal side-effect of rendering us equally irrelevant. Might this be our true symbolic sacrifice, as we suggested above?

In "all historical crimes that we know", including "Auschwitz, Hiroshima, genocides", Baudrillard claimed, the distinction between victims and perpetrators was evident and "the theatre of operations" distinguishable. In our "immersion into banality", instead, all these distinctions are erased, making the most bloodless crime "the subtlest form of extermination" — that is the only "perfect" one (Baudrillard, 2011, pp. 45–46). We could even say that ours is the situation in which *physical extermination is rendered irrelevant by the pre-emptive banalisation of existence* — a different way to say that our life only continues and terminates without any symbolic stake, a life it does not even make sense to kill. Moreover, because we are the agents of our extermination, Baudrillard considered it a form of voluntary suicide, "the equivalent of the suicide of the species" (*Ibid*., p. 46). It is a precautionary suicide that is a perfect form of security, as it renders our death senseless, too — almost as if the crime itself had been exterminated.

However, this is, at the same time, a "life penalty" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 81), in the sense that, from now on, we do not have any other reason to live than to protect this life which cannot go anywhere and, thus, has no literal 'sense', no destination that transcends it. We are stuck in the 'loft' of an absolute reality — this is how we can interpret the

argument of "the fall into banality" Baudrillard draws from Heidegger's *Being and Time* (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 25; Heidegger, 1996, p. 164). This is also why Baudrillard, as we have started to see in the previous paragraph, repeatedly runs into an impasse as he tries to imagine the destiny of this process. In 2000, Mike Gane observed that Baudrillard finds it essential to find "the ironic deviation of the real" to avoid being stuck inside the hegemonic "logic of the real". At the same time, he notices Baudrillard's difficulty in finding "the way forward" (Gane, 2000, p. 33). Before that drastic revision we reviewed, Baudrillard formulated what he also admits to being "science fiction" hypotheses when he tried to imagine it.

In *Passwords*, he tries to picture a scenario that will take the place of the virtual:

> "It is difficult to say because, beyond the virtual, I see nothing but what Freud called 'nirvana', an exchange of molecular substance and nothing more. All that would remain would be a perfect wave system, which would join up with the system of particles in a purely physical universe that no longer had anything human, moral, or — obviously — metaphysical about it. In this way, we would have returned to a material stage, with a senseless circulation of elements..." (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. 44).

Faced with this imaginary outcome, he then hypothesises that, without that "implosion", we could instead have "an optimistic viewpoint" inside the virtual:

> "Leaving science fiction behind, we can only note, after all, the peculiar irony there is in the fact that these technologies, which we associate with inhumanity and annihilation, will in the end, perhaps, be what frees us from the world of value, the world of judgement. All this heavy moral, philosophical culture, which modern radical thought has done its metaphysical utmost to liquidate after a back-breaking struggle, technology expels pragmatically and radically with the virtual. At the stage we are at, we do not know whether technology, having reached a point of extreme sophistication, will liberate us from technology itself — the optimistic viewpoint — or whether in fact we are heading for catastrophe. Even though catastrophes, in the dramaturgical sense of the term — that is to say, endings — may, depending on the protagonists, assume happy or unhappy forms" (Baudrillard, 2003b, pp. 44–45)

Here, and until the last texts we have analysed, we often witness this explosion of hypotheses which precisely resembles that "senseless circulation" with — we could paraphrase — no longer anything theoretical about it. We could interpret it as the definitive '*aphorising*' of theory, as it fragments itself integrally without even leaving a trace of the minimum coherence. After all, in these paragraphs, we have been searching for Baudrillard's message with too much insistence, momentarily putting the essential — its *form* — aside. In this way, we have reached the *barrier* of Baudrillard's theory, which,

179

in its contents, corresponds with the barrier of our system and its apparent irreversibility.

Moreover, this explosion is something which proves what Baudrillard kept repeating: the impossibility of discourse, the impossibility of a subjective horizon which holds everything together in a coherent representation, the fragmentation of thought to the point it merges with the course of things and only resurfaces aphoristically in a game of appearance and disappearance. The *ironical deviation* that, rightfully, Mike Gane does not find in the content of Baudrillard's hypotheses can perhaps be found in the form of his thought — is not the "curvature" of thought that "you never see" (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 26) this constant slipping beyond its content and toward its form, this continuous blowback of the material, of the literal?

At the outer limits of our disappearance, we have also reached the outer limits of Baudrillard's theory, and we cannot squeeze anything more from it: "Too much is too much". It is precisely at the points where his theoretical language discernibly becomes something else that we are taken to the other side of theory:

> "Every process growing exponentially generates a barrier: the speed barrier, the heat barrier, the information barrier, the transparency barrier, the Virtual barrier. And that barrier is insuperable. [...] The gravitational collapse of every system, of every process, of every body in movement, whose acceleration creates a reciprocal shock wave, an antagonistic force not just equal but greater, which constitutes its absolute limit, its negative horizon, and beyond which it cancels itself out. Too much is too much" (Baudrillard, 2005b, pp. 192–193).

He called this "the 'vanishing point' of discourse itself" (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 138), which is the vanishing point of theory as we know it. Might this be what Baudrillard had in mind when he referred to a voice laughing backstage of *Loft Story* and, in a way, ironically undermining the reality of the show? Is an ironical disarticulation of theory — of the *reality* of theory — needed to cultivate the ironical deviation of reality?

> "Hence the other question, taking the place as a final interrogation: WHO WAS LAUGHING IN THE LOFT? Within this material world without a trace of humor, what sort of monster could laugh back-stage? What sort of sarcastic divinity could laugh about all of it from his innermost depths? The human all too human must have turned over in his grave. But as we know very well, human convulsions are a distraction for the gods, who merely laugh at them" (Baudrillard, 2011, pp. 52–53).

Does thought ultimately lie in that semi-divine laughter which undermines the seriousness of any discourse and any content of theory, reminding us that no reality, not even one set up against the hegemony of the system, resists the irruption of reversibility? Even a theoretical "attempt at accumulation is ruined in advance by the void", by the element in us which "disaccumulates unto death, undoes, destroys,

liquidates, and disconnects so that we can resist the pressure of the real, and live" (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 51), that is, preserve a core of singularity, human or not.

The Machine That Thinks Us: The Supremacy of Artificial Intelligence

What more can thought say once the hegemony of the virtual is already accomplished — since its virtual character has even solved the issue of actualisation and everything can unproblematically 'roam' about the world without undermining it? Can a *literal* view of it, of its total virtuality, disclose some other hypothesis? "This is the last hope", admitted Baudrillard: "thought is one part — in no sense especially privileged — of this world in its self-dissolution, in its irresistible evolution toward its own disappearance" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 271). As he also considered, the form it takes cannot be taken for granted in any way, particularly when reality far surpasses thought in terms of radicality.

> "Critical intelligence is left to jump over its own shadow: even in its radicalness, it remains pious and denunciatory. The curse of critical discourse is to reconcile itself secretly with those it criticizes by denouncing them (and I am well aware that what I am saying here belongs to this discourse)" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 39).

While he still hoped for the revenge of the symbolic within reality (even if as a catastrophic resolution of reality), did Baudrillard say the extreme word of radical thought? It seems inevitable that this form of theory cannot continue to exist as before and needs to undergo an equally radical metamorphosis. The problem is that, beyond the way Baudrillard conceived it, there is only *an even more radical literalness of the side of things* — in other words, no more theoretical re-elaboration even in the form of the harshest denunciation that Baudrillard (and this thesis) inevitably adopted.

That means the temptation to ask what to make of radical theory and thinking has become outdated. Genuinely radical is only to consider that *the object thinks us back as we think it* — the question becomes, then, what does the object make of us? What does radicalism make of us? So, the conclusions come from the hypotheses we can advance on this "retro-thought" (Baudrillard, 2004b, p. 15): what happens to theory as we move it further, along with events, following the curvature of their appearance-disappearance? And what happens as, with 'lucid pessimism' (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 209), we attempt to discern irreducible forms in a virtually integrated system? In other words, we stick to the literality of the object and events (including both theory and reality) by considering the deviations they mutually impose on each other as we conceive them.

In Baudrillard's latest text, we find a possible comprehensive formulation: what becomes of "radicalism [...] when it deserts the individual, reconciled with himself and homogenised by the good offices of the digital, and when all critical thinking has

disappeared" (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 69)? This is the only way, Baudrillard writes, we can "avoid" the "insoluble questions" we also have been asking in this chapter: the fate of the "disappearance" of the world, including that of human beings, into "an integral reality" and, conversely, the hypothetical "vulnerability" of "global power" (*Ibid.*, pp. 63-63). There can only be an answer by considering what the object makes of us — its fatal strategies — including the impossibility of doing anything with it, particularly with theory. If we ask the question of *having done with theory* correctly, we must question what is the destiny of theory — has theory, by which I mean a radical thought, done away with us already?

Furthermore, we must note that evil (or singularity) now presents itself in even rarer forms than those an already disillusioned Baudrillard discerned. Individuals' "unilateral positive adherence" to the system is now virtually universal: we are "the perfectly normalised being[s]", totally subjected and adjusted to the idea of our "own reality":

> "Countless individuals have gone over to reality, to their own reality, by eliminating all consideration of the dual and the insoluble. And the mystery of this positive crystallization, of this suspension of doubt about the real — forcibly real — world remains entire" (*Ibid.*, p. 68, modified translation).

Baudrillard seemed to sense at the horizon not just a growing collective 'will to adhere' but, better, *a total eclipse of the doubt* of whether to adhere or not. We are thus faced with a progressive waning even of those forms of denial and rejection that constituted, in the late Baudrillard's logic, a sort of 'degree zero' of radicalism: "If the world is to be taken *en bloc*, then it is at that point we reject it *en bloc*. There is no other solution. This is a rejection similar to the biological rejection of a foreign body" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 26). The 'irrational' "No" in the EU constitutional referendum of 2005 (to which we could add the later Brexit vote or Trump's victory) still express symptoms of rejection but not, as Baudrillard suspected too, signs of a system "collapsing […] from within" (Baudrillard, 2006b).

After Baudrillard, we had the 'luck' to materially observe a (perhaps involuntary) brilliant solution from the side of the global system: making adherence to integral reality coincide with the will to live and activating an automatic consensus. Nothing summarises this strategy better than Mario Draghi's open "technocratic cynicism", as Baudrillard called the French TV CEO's open admission that their goal was to make "the viewer's brains accessible", to get "them to open up" for advertisement (Baudrillard, 2010b, pp. 37–38). As seen previously, Draghi, as Italian PM, said:

> "The appeal not to get vaccinated is an appeal to die, basically. You don't get vaccinated, you get sick, you die. Or you kill: you don't get vaccinated, you get sick, you contaminate, someone dies" (Lettig, 2021).

If we read this with the standard tools of signification, it might seem like a banal form of blackmail, as many opposers thought. After all, choosing between one option and the other was 'technically' possible. At the same time, living without a vaccination certificate was rendered 'technically' impossible in many countries, making it a false alternative. This is the first hypothetical literal reading of Draghi's revealing statement. Either you accept to be technically integrated, or you 'die' (your life becomes technically impossible). 'Death', which in our system is equivalent to 'impossibility' and 'absurdity', is the fate of those who do not integrate.

The vaccines are merely a metaphor for how rejecting the universal Good becomes literally *unreal* (and almost impossible). A rejection of the global system makes life technically unliveable — we could also think about what it means to give up smartphones and social media entirely or if working for an academic institution would be possible without emails. The choice is not prohibited as some — interpreting a metaphor of our condition as a surreal return to fascism — think but removed entirely. Either you choose reality, or you will become unreal. As discussed in this chapter, this particular 'death' is not a symbolic death in the stronger sense. Instead, it resembles a mortification or a de-realisation in the terms we use here.

That is why, even more radically, this makes us wonder whether or not those who technically chose not to be vaccinated were, at the cost of their 'metaphorical death', free of this integration. Draghi's words could also be taken as a sign of total indifference from the side of the system. Evoking the vacuous figure of 'death' could also imply that there is no choice, that the choice itself is 'mortified'. If you did not get vaccinated, the system would have taken care of you in any case: restricting your freedom of encountering other humans, you would have been 'vaccinated' (stripped of your biological potentiality to contaminate) all the same. This means that, when it was not done spontaneously, the system found an automatic way of integrating even those who rejected integration *en bloc*. It rendered their 'no' irrelevant — equivalent to a 'yes'.

Considering that the life of those already integrated was not much more 'liveable', this seems like a more incisive hypothesis. In general, if we think about how human life was, perhaps definitively, raised to its ultra-real version, we could say that integration was provided to everyone indiscriminately in a sort of chimeric 'forced democratic' inclusion — in Macedonio Fernandez's words, a "total democracy, that is absolute government of the majority" (Fernandez, 2020, p. 33). For instance, resorting to remote working solutions, which did not encounter almost any resistance, is another example that both options led to the same *choice*. Encounters among humans were either digitally replaced or automatically managed, as in the case of digital certificates regulating access to social life. In all aspects of this ultra-sociality, all human discretion was systematically removed: *it is the software that logs you in and off*. Once more, all of these 'novelties' were accepted without protests, considering the virus or governments responsible instead. This demonstrates that the choice had already been made within "the collective unconscious" (Jung, 1981).

Baudrillard's last text is already sure about this:

> "At the end-point of this rise of the machine, in which all human intelligence is encapsulated — a machine which is now assured of total autonomy as a result — it is clear that mankind exists only at the cost of its own death. It becomes immortal only by paying the price of its technological disappearance, of its inscription in the digital order. [...] this is the open form of immortality and in reality, so far as the human species is concerned, the choice has been made and it is embodied in the supremacy of Artificial Intelligence" (Baudrillard, 2009, pp. 62–63).

Whereas current debates presume that the choice is still in human hands, these recent events testify that the choice has already been made. The only alternative is between living cyber-hegemonically or dying, as Draghi says, "between disappearing or being 'humanengineerized'" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 83). Then matters are already decided unless a radical form appears within the machine itself or our bodies transformed into terminals.

HYPOTHESES OF CONCLUSION:
THE ENJOYMENT OF DISAPPEARANCE

Hypotheses From the Other Side of the End

> "People have spoken so often about the end of things that I'd like to be able to see what goes on the other side of the end, in a sort of hyperspace and transfinity. And even if things are not really at their end, well! Let's act as if they were. It's a game, a provocation. Not in order to put a full stop to everything but, on the contrary, to make everything begin again" (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 133).

> "And they saw a stucco angel whose extremities were joined along one curve.
> *Baroque Apocalypse*, sixteenth century" (Baudrillard, 2001b, p. 78)

As Baudrillard observed, looking *retrospectively* at a work that was never "prospective" is "paradoxical" (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 17). The spirit of this project was analogous. Instead of programming the various themes to be dealt with, the chapters repeatedly attempted to revive the intensity of the *pensée*-Baudrillard. After all, his approach forbids making a discourse out of it, claiming to represent its reality. Its radical confrontation with the real, and the idea that the singularity of the world must be coupled with an enigmatic-literal form, had to be respected. In line with his early remark, "*the radicalization of hypotheses*" was indeed "*the only possible method*" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 206). Baudrillard's thought was scattered along different routes, detecting potential theoretical attractors and enigmatic events that, once coupled together, could produce unexpected effects. In doing so, the project has repeatedly thrown Baudrillard's theories around like dice and measured to what extent the voice of theory resists the ravages of integral reality.

The initial research question ("*Has Baudrillard's radical theory succeeded in bringing the system of reality to the point of collapse, or has it failed and gone silent instead?*") acted as a "vanishing point" and "horizon of disappearance" (Baudrillard, 2009, pp. 20–21). We

obtained a few advantages by postulating the limit-hypothesis of radical thought being integrated by the operation of reality. One was prefiguring the further extreme phenomena that could await us by exaggerating an intrinsically exaggerated system — which also means taking it for what it is, in its literalness. Attempting to push Baudrillard's thought toward its vanishing point was also a way of taking its method seriously — avoiding facile criticisms — while preventing its immunity from possibly being resolved. Indeed, the third advantage was avoiding turning theory into an interminable exercise, conceiving the possibility of its extermination and resolution. The conclusion's task is to review the outcomes of this approach.

For the introduction, we drew on his habit of jumping into the middle of issues without many preambles. Likewise, for the conclusion, we can look at how Baudrillard 'left the scene'. Indeed, his disappearance seems to repeat the crucial dilemma of his theory — the duel between irreversible and reversible processes — once more.

Biographically, Baudrillard's disappearance might not seem as attractive as that of Hölderlin and Nietzsche (Zweig, 2011; Agamben, 2023a), who ended their days secluded in their 'madness', or the physicist Ettore Majorana, vanished into thin air after boarding a ship to Palermo (Agamben, 2018c). But this is true only if we look at them through the lens of subjectivity, either in subjectivity's failure (the first two) or in a problematical use of the will (Majorana). Instead, if we look at them in their *literalness*, even Baudrillard's cancer becomes interesting and helps us draw a provisional picture of his form of thought. We have seen that the literalness of a phenomenon is found at the intersection of thought and its reality in their reciprocal alteration and resolution. In other words, what trace does Baudrillard's disappearance leave if we consider its trajectory?

Latouche, in a brief hint, seems to consider the question legitimate: "Last ironic manifestation, or not, Baudrillard succumbs to the 'man-made disease' that is cancer" (Latouche, 2019, p. 64). In effect, the irreversible form that took hold of his body is an example of "*The Revenge of the Immortals*" against "the impossibility of dying" for which, instead, Baudrillard considered vital fighting (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 37). The duel between interminability and death, or irreversible and reversible processes, is the one underlying our initial question: does radical thought survive or succumb to the irreversibility of integral reality?

Baudrillard's biological death, something he considered inconsequential in itself, cannot be seen as the response. As we have seen, he considered knowing "how to disappear" essential, not leaving "it to biology to decide when" one "will disappear" (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 24). Instead, we can ask if Baudrillard's form of thought may be seen as *an anticipated response that altered its death in advance*, successfully anticipating the moves of his cancerous cells. This might be a reading of his last words in an imaginary literal way: "In the beginning was the Word. It was only afterwards that the Silence came. The end itself has disappeared..." (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 70). Baudrillard's trajectory of

thought was an art of disappearance that aimed to resolve the problem of death, of the banal reality of biological termination. Baudrillard's "poetic philosophy" aimed precisely at making reality disappear, resolving it in a "felicitous" form (Baudrillard and Noailles, 2007, p. 10). By reviewing the outcomes of this thesis, we also review some of the outcomes of this form of thought: does something felicitous survive the silence after Baudrillard's word? Does "everything begin again" (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 133), indicating that other radical thought could appear? All things considered, this is the real question. The disappearance of a thought — including Baudrillard's — is aimed at precipitating things for something exceptional (singular?) to appear. Its perfection consists in participating in this destiny of disappearance and appearance: its "vanishing […] into the actual course of the world" (Baudrillard, 2006a, p. 70).

> "A millenarian impatience in writing. Say things very quickly so as not to keep the line engaged while waiting for an exceptional call to come. Get what you have to say off your chest. You don't have the time to explain or convince any longer, don't have the time for prediction, but only for the anticipation, the precession of thought which has no other aim [*fin*] than to precipitate things [*précipiter les choses*]. And what it is looking for is never proof, but *self-evidence*. To show up the self-evident in all its glory, at the expense of truth, with contemptuous disregard for reality. No scruples with reality; you have to have your way with it [*en jouir*] criminally, until the words to express it emerge. Though there is no foundation to this, it is all stunningly obvious. Of course, if there are thought effects, there are also compensation effects. For every experience of thought, there are thousands of compensations" (Baudrillard, 1996a, pp. 17–18).

Among these "compensation effects", we have to hypothesise that the machine — integral reality — might also have "its anticipated response" (Baudrillard, 2002). As seen in the sixth chapter, the power to resolve things in advance by virtually realising them has liquefied the possibility of a critical thought. Baudrillard's late works seem to respond that siding with the object — developing what we have called 'literalness' — is the only radical strategy. However, this might well not be the end of it.

The late Baudrillard seemed to consider that radical thought, too, could pass entirely on the side of things, of the machine, depriving human thought of its singularity. This makes us wonder whether his 'last words' mentioned above could assume another sense — if Baudrillard's silence came right on time before there was nothing radical to be uttered anymore. An ironic sign of this possibility is the appearance of the iPhone in 2007, the year Baudrillard definitively went silent. We should also notice that Baudrillard turned to silence in his writings (in the above passage) before biologically 'going silent' (i.e. dying). The last fatal strategy could be read this way: anticipating, probably unintentionally, "the global silence" of our screens "that marks our hours, minutes and seconds?" (DeLillo, 2020, p. 80). This hypothesis would immediately put to sleep the

hopes in ulterior forms of thought in the way we mean it. After all, is not this the sense of the entirety of Baudrillard's work?

Indeed, what emerges from this project, too, is that Baudrillard constantly looked for a form of radical thought without compromise. In doing this, he pre-emptively accepted that what has always been considered a 'legitimate' form of theorising could disappear. *The best radical quality of his work consists precisely in this challenge that analyses all possible forms of radicalism to only spare the irreducible ones* — even to the point, we hypothesise, to cancel itself. By considering the 'object Baudrillard', we accepted to be "analysed by it in return", knowing we could have never "master[ed the] object" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 204) and that the object, too, might have disappeared without return. Is this the last ironic 'revenge' of the 'object Baudrillard', ejecting itself from our analysis at the end of it and reaffirming its unrealisable literalness? This is a further material (and cruel) demonstration of this thought's fatal quality, culminating in the disappearance of the subject who analyses it. Analysing the object means being analysed by and disappearing with it. Using the analogy for illustrative purposes, if the real properties of a particle become probabilistic once an observer intervenes to measure them (Agamben, 2018c, para. 6), we have to draw the further consequence that the reality of the entire system disappears into probability. And that includes the observer, too. Returning to Baudrillard, if the subject does not see the object anymore, that cannot be a subject, but only *the object of the object's irony* — the effect of its disappearance.

Taking all this literally, at the basis of the consideration of Baudrillard, there might have been, since the beginning, a secret desire for disappearance: analysing the Baudrillard-thought to be resolved by it. In light of our examinations of integral reality, this could be read in the following way, advancing another enigmatic response to our question. Perhaps the mode of disappearance we invented with the virtual does not fully satisfy our *will to disappear*, which could be seen as the passion peculiar to our condition:

> "[...] fascination (in contrast to seduction, which was attached to appearances, and to dialectical reason, which was attached to meaning) is a nihilistic passion par excellence, it is the passion proper to the mode of disappearance. We are fascinated by all forms of disappearance, of our disappearance" (Baudrillard, 1994a, p. 160).

This suggests an interesting hypothesis within the debate on "the collapse of desire" and the decline of libido in our societies (see Pettman, 2021). If a drive to disappear, which for Baudrillard is a supreme form of enjoyment, survives, this collapse might not be a renunciation to seeking enjoyment but a rejection of the ultra-real avatar of pleasure. If we return to Baudrillard, it cannot be otherwise, since "pleasure, satisfaction and the fulfilment of desire belong to the economic order" and are condemned to be "accumulative and repetitive" (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 241n). Therefore, they are also the accomplices of the irreversible process of integral reality in its interminability. On the contrary, "enjoyment belongs to the symbolic order", that is, to "the reversal, the resolution of accumulation and repetition" (*Ibid.*). Let us only think of the pornographic

hyperpresence of any digital platform, regardless of its adult content. Repeating Baudrillard, what we miss there is not the world but its fascinating disappearance: the resolution of appearances that, instead, are multiplied and 'augmented' on the screens. "We have *lost touch* with the world" (Pettman, 2021, p. 116) also means that we miss being resolved in and by it — the *world as it is* is the singularity of a mutual disappearance. The virtual is undoubtedly alien to this form of metamorphosis. In this sense, although it is "a much more radical solution than all the others", integral reality is perhaps not "*the final solution*" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 18). And this is not because we glimpse a higher form that resolves it, but because the resolution it promises is unsatisfying — that is, it is not a total resolution.

There is undeniably a pessimistic corollary to this. We might still be far from the worse version of this process, so we could still be "on course for the perfect crime" (*Ibid.*, p. 130). Perhaps we must be thankful for what we see as a calamity: "All calamities protect us from something worse" (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 14). Nonetheless, in another 'Baudrillardian' perspective, this is the best starting point for a 'felicitous outcome': "catastrophes, in the dramaturgical sense of the term — that is to say, endings — may, depending on the protagonists, assume happy or unhappy forms" (Baudrillard, 2003b, p. 45). Regardless of its happy or unhappy sign, what could this form be? In reviewing the outcomes of this thesis, we have some space to imagine it.

The Radicalism of Literalness: Baudrillard's Wager and the Failure of Thought

The chapters of this thesis are nothing but experiments with literalness, articulated in various forms but always tracing back to its Baudrillardian function of an anti-discourse challenging reality. This is the first paradoxical principle this study insisted on and which arguably distinguishes Baudrillard's radicalism from other contemporary forms. The principle of reversibility in Baudrillard's theory consists in a *literal* reading of things with nothing prescriptive nor critical. In Baudrillard, thought is not considered a meta-language representing or reflecting reality. Instead, as he continues to repeat throughout his works, "consciousness is an integral part of the world and the world is an integral part of consciousness: I think it and it thinks me" (Baudrillard, 2005b, p. 39). This is his way of interpreting and accounting for the consequences of the philosophies after Hegel, indicating a radical immanence as the horizon of modern societies (see Nancy, 2002).

Baudrillard's singularity, and what renders his theory incompatible with postmodernism, resides in having identified a response to this critical condition that both takes it seriously and develops it radically. Postmodernism can be considered a 'flight' from the problems of modernity and their recuperation in an abstract way, a "fetishism of [...] purer signs", uprooted from their original terrain (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 150). For example, today's political activism employs modern categories such as

subjectivity and representation without considering their obsolescence (at least, if their philosophical destruction is taken as seriously as their invention). In this precise sense, Baudrillard defines "postmodernity" as "the simultaneity of the destruction of earlier values and their reconstruction", that is, "renovation within ruination" (*Ibid.*).

Baudrillard is very far from this framework. As the thesis showed, his theory is uncompromising in considering both our condition and its inherent reversal. The problem of the correct term to be used, on which many have debated, little interested him. Baudrillard's concern exclusively consisted in responding to the uncertainty of the current condition.

> "We have to find the event of modernity or post-modernity (the term is of no importance!) which, in its singularity, forces us, not to correct existing views, but to invent other ways of thinking, other rules" (Baudrillard, 2004a, p. 41).

This is a way to both account for the problem of nihilism as defined by Nietzsche and discover-invent another radical form. Immediately afterwards, Baudrillard says very explicitly how he conceived this "wager", in a way that also seems to confirm that the reversibility of reality remains the core of his theoretical strategy.

> "It's a wager of a Pascalian kind. Pascal says that, though you can, admittedly, get by without God, it's much more advantageous to gamble on the contrary option, and he shows us why. It's the same for us. We can live and survive with the real world, with the reality principle. That's what we do in a way, but it's much more amusing to wager that reality doesn't exist! If you make the assumption that reality doesn't exist, then everything changes, which is fantastic. It's true Pascal wagered that God existed, whereas here we're making more the opposite wager — gambling on radical illusion. It's the opposite, but it's also the same form: that of a challenge to reality, instead of a contract with reality" (*Ibid.*).

This should not surprise us: once more, Baudrillard repeats that even his theory's reality and realism are unimportant compared to its challenging quality. "You have to gamble, you have to up the stakes" (*Ibid.*), he clarifies. This means to side with illusion in the sense of *in-ludere*, 'putting into play', that is, gambling. It means to reject a conception of thought restricted to the representation and reflection of reality, which has also been demolished by later modern philosophy. It also contemplates the risk of failing. However, failure is only a problem of a thought that intends to master the object. Conversely, it is an integral part of a thought which accepts being thought by the object in return, being fatally altered by what it thinks. The incompleteness of thought is a sign of the object's strategy.

> *If the system fails to be everything, nothing will remain of it. If thought fails to be nothing, something will remain of it*" (Baudrillard, 1996b, p. 151).

If this study can aim to contribute to the contemporary debates in social theory and philosophy of society, that cannot consist in an exhaustive rediscovery or defence of Baudrillard's work. That would not only be beyond reach but, most importantly, an unforgivable form of subjective arrogance. The thesis can be considered successful only if, both humbly and boldly, it worked for illusion. With a little variation: Baudrillard[69] "was given to us as something enigmatic and unintelligible, and the task of thought is to make it, if possible, even more enigmatic and unintelligible" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 199). That, it must be clarified once more, is in no way a postmodernist 'plenary indulgence' for all the sins. We cannot play with Baudrillard the way we want. "The player must never be bigger than the game itself, nor the theorist bigger than theory, nor theory bigger than the world itself" (*Ibid.*).

If we want to find out the outcomes of Baudrillard's work, we must accept the rules of its thought and, since we would also bet on duality (against reality), the rules of the *world as it is*. This is a paradoxical way of accessing a thinker since the arbitrariness of thought seems to coincide with its consubstantiality with the world — with being "a thing among things". When he talked about photography, Baudrillard got as close as possible to illustrating his literal phenomenology:

> "Taking a photograph does not mean taking the world as an object but to make it become an object, uncovering the alterity buried beneath the so-called reality, making it emerge like a strange attractor and setting this strange attraction in an image" (Baudrillard and Guillaume, 2008, p. 148).

From this perspective, literal thought is an art that makes reality disappear and uncovers the illusoriness of the world. Clearly, it is not a thought that can be evaluated according to its verifiability or adherence to reality, but quite the opposite. The more it distances us from reality, the more it gets us closer to the illusory, ironical and dual dimension of things, the more we can consider it 'valid'.

A fascinating philosophical anecdote I received as an objection to this project is worth mentioning. The treatise *Of True Religion* is a letter Augustine addresses to his friend Rominianus, a Manichaean (like Augustine before), in an attempt to convert him to Christianity (Augustine (of Hippo), 1959). The argument reiterates what Augustine writes elsewhere in his comment on Isaiah:

---

[69] In the original, "the world" — which means that is also valid for the 'object Baudrillard'.

> *"Dicit mihi homo: 'Intellegam ut credam'. Respondeo: 'Crede ut intellegas'* [A man tells me: 'Make me understand so that I may believe'. I respond: 'Believe so that you may understand']" (Augustine (of Hippo), no date)

The same seemingly applies to Baudrillard's thought: accepting its position seems preliminary to its understanding. However, as Augustine did, we should reverse our interlocutor's argument: *one must first not believe so that they may understand* — ironically, Baudrillard openly said to "prefer Manichaeism" (Baudrillard, 2010b, p. 111). One must not believe in the reality principle, including the reality of Baudrillard as a discourse of truth, to *enjoy* it. In fact, understanding is only a limited part of the operation of thought, which implies the disappearance of the object in the analysis and the evaporation of the subject. The questions, ultimate or penultimate, depending on the answer, are the following.

Has the object become something else in the analysis (a sign that it remained faithful to it)?

Has the subject undergone a radical metamorphosis (a sign that the object was effectively there)?

Enjoyment comes from the disappearance of things. If the enjoyment was not entire, everything has not already disappeared.

192

REFERENCES

Adorno, T. W. (1970) 'Society', *Salmagundi*, (No. 10/11, Fall 1969-Winter 1970), pp. 144–153.

Adorno, T. W. (1973) *Negative Dialectics*. Seabury Press.

Adorno, T. W. (1974) *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. New Left Books.

Adorno, T. W. *et al.* (1976) *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. Heinemann.

Agamben, G. (1993) *Infancy and History*. Verso.

Agamben, G. (1998) *Homo Sacer*. Stanford University Press.

Agamben, G. (1999) *Potentialities*. Stanford University Press.

Agamben, G. (2005) *State of Exception*. The University of Chicago Press.

Agamben, G. (2009a) *The Signature of all Things. On Method*. Zone Books.

Agamben, G. (2009b) *What is an Apparatus?* Stanford University Press.

Agamben, G. (2016) *The Use of Bodies*. Stanford University Press.

Agamben, G. (2017) *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*. Stanford University Press.

Agamben, G. (2018a) *Pulcinella, or, Entertainment for Kids in Four Scenes*. Seagull Books.

Agamben, G. (2018b) *What is Philosophy?* Stanford University Press.

Agamben, G. (2018c) *What is Real?* Stanford University Press.

Agamben, G. (2021a) *A che punto siamo? L'epidemia come politica. Nuova edizione accresciuta.* Quodlibet.

Agamben, G. (2021b) *Humans and Lemmings, Old News.* Available at: stiriinternationale.ro/humans-and-lemmings/.

Agamben, G. (2021c) *La follia di Hölderlin. Cronaca di una vita abitante (1806-1843).* Einaudi.

Agamben, G. (2021d) *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic As Politics*. Eris.

Agamben, G. (2022) *Quel che ho visto, udito, appreso...* Einaudi.

Agamben, G. (2023a) *Hölderlin's Madness: Chronicle of a Dwelling Life, 1806–1843*. Seagull Books.

Agamben, G. (2023b) 'Le due facce del potere', *2Una Voce,* 8 March.

Agamben, G. (2023c) *Pinocchio: The Adventures of a Puppet, Doubly Commented upon and Triply Illustrated*. Seagull Books.

Anders, G. (1956) *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen / 1 Uber die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*. Beck.

Anders, G. (1980) *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen / 2 Uber die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution*. Beck.

Angelucci, D. (2017) 'Estetica fatale', *Lo Sguardo - Rivista di filosofia*, 23(1), pp. 153–163.

Aristotle (1984) *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*. Edited by J. Barnes. Princeton University Press.

Artaud, A. (2010) *The Theatre and Its Double*. Alma Classics.

Augustine (of Hippo), S. (1959) *Of True Religion*. Henry Regnery Company.

Augustine (of Hippo), S. (no date) *Sermo 43, 7, 9*. Available at: https://www.augustinus.it/latino/discorsi/discorso_054_testo.htm.

Babich, B. (2022) *Günther Anders' Philosophy of Technology*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Ballard, J. G. (1973) *Crash*. Jonathan Cape.

Ballard, J. G. (2009) *The Complete Stories of J. G. Ballard*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Bataille, G. (2001) *Unfinished System Of Nonknowledge*. University of Minnesota Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1975) *The Mirror of Production*. Telos Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1981) *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Telos Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1983a) *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities... or The End of the Social*. Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard, J. (1983b) *Simulations*. Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard, J. (1988) *America*. Verso.

Baudrillard, J. (1990a) *Cool Memories 1980-1985*. Verso.

Baudrillard, J. (1990b) *Fatal Strategies*. Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard, J. (1990c) *Seduction*. New World Perspectives.

Baudrillard, J. (1993a) *Baudrillard Live. Selected Interviews*. Edited by M. Gane. Routledge.

Baudrillard, J. (1993b) *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Sage Publications.

Baudrillard, J. (1993c) *The Transparency of Evil. Essays on Extreme Phenomena*. Verso Books.

Baudrillard, J. (1994a) *Simulacra and Simulation*. The University of Michigan Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1994b) *The Illusion of the End*. Polity Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1995) *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Indiana University Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1996a) *Cool Memories II 1987-1990*. Duke University Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1996b) *The Perfect Crime*. Verso.

Baudrillard, J. (1996c) *The System of Objects*. Verso.

Baudrillard, J. (1997) *Fragments, Cool Memories III, 1990-1995*. Verso.

Baudrillard, J. (1998a) *Paroxysm: Interviews with Philippe Petit*. Verso.

Baudrillard, J. (1998b) *The Consumer Society*. Sage Publications.

Baudrillard, J. (2000a) 'Meet the David Bowie of philosophy. Interview with Steven Poole', *The Guardian*, 14 March.

Baudrillard, J. (2000b) *The Vital Illusion*. Columbia University Press.

Baudrillard, J. (2001a) *Impossible Exchange*. Verso.

Baudrillard, J. (2001b) *The Uncollected Baudrillard*. Edited by G. Genosko. Sage Publications.

Baudrillard, J. (2002) 'Violence of the Virtual and Integral Reality', *Light Onwords / Light Onwards Living Literacies Text of the November 14-16, 2002 Conference*.

Baudrillard, J. (2003a) *Cool Memories IV 1995-2000*. Verso.

Baudrillard, J. (2003b) *Passwords*. Verso.

Baudrillard, J. (2003c) *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*. Verso.

Baudrillard, J. (2004a) *Fragments: Interviews with Jean Baudrillard*. Routledge.

Baudrillard, J. (2004b) 'Hétérodafé', in *Cahier Baudrillard*. L'Herne, pp. 15–21.

Baudrillard, J. (2004c) *Le Pacte de lucidité ou l'intelligence du Mal*. Editions Galilée.

Baudrillard, J. (2004d) 'War Porn', in *The Conspiracy of Art*. Semiotext(e), pp. 205–209.

Baudrillard, J. (2005a) *The Conspiracy of Art*. Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard, J. (2005b) *The Intelligence of Evil Or the Lucidity Pact*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Baudrillard, J. (2006a) *Cool memories V 2000-2004*. Polity Press.

Baudrillard, J. (2006b) 'The Riots of Autumn or The Other Who Will Not Be Mothered', *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, 3(2).

Baudrillard, J. (2007) *Forget Foucault*. Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard, J. (2008) *The Jean Baudrillard Reader, The Jean Baudrillard Reader*. Edited by S. Redhead. Edinburgh University Press.

Baudrillard, J. (2009) *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?* Seagull Books.

Baudrillard, J. (2010a) *Carnival and Cannibal*. Seagull Books.

Baudrillard, J. (2010b) *The Agony of Power*. Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard, J. (2011) *Telemorphosis*. Univocal Publishing.

Baudrillard, J. (2012) *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard, J. (2013) 'Le Bon plaisir', in Guillaume, V. (ed.) *Jean Baudrillard et le Centre Pompidou, Une biographie intellectuelle (les années Traverses, Centre Pompidou, 1967-2000*. Le bord de l'eau, Lormont, pp. 127–146.

Baudrillard, J. (2015) *From Hyperreality to Disappearance: Uncollected Interviews*. Edited by R. G. Smith and D. B. Clarke. Edinburgh University Press.

Baudrillard, J. (2017) *The Disappearance of Culture: Uncollected Interviews*. Edited by R. G. Smith and D. B. Clarke. Edinburgh University Press.

Baudrillard, J. and Guillaume, M. (2008) *Radical alterity*. Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard, J. and Noailles, E. V. (2007) *Exiles from Dialogue*. Polity Press.

Bauman, Z. (1992) *Intimations of Postmodernity*. Routledge.

Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Polity Press.

Bell, D. A. (2023) 'The Zelensky myth', *The New Statesman*, 20 February.

Bene, C. (2002) *Opere, con l'Autografia di un ritratto*. Bompiani.

Bene, C. and Deleuze, G. (2012) *Sovrapposizioni*. Quodlibet.

Benjamin, W. (1968) *Illuminations*. Schocken Books.

Benjamin, W. (1998) *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Verso.

Benjamin, W. (1999) *The Arcades Project*. Harvard University Press.

Bernhard, T. (1973) *Midland in Stilfs: drei Erzählungen*. Suhrkamp.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press.

Van Brugen, I. (2023) 'Putin Heckled While Visiting Mariupol: "It's All for Show"', *Newsweek*.

Cacciari, M. (1993) *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*. Yale University Press.

Cacciari, M. (2018) *The Withholding Power: An Essay on Political Theology*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Calasso, R. (2020) *The Unnamable Present*. Penguin Books.

Canetti, E. (1962) *Crowds and Power*. Continuum.

Canetti, E. (1978) *The Human Province*. Edited by J. Neugroschel. Seabury Press.

Canetti, E. (1989) *The Secret Heart of the Clock*. Farrar Straus Giroux.

Ceronetti, G. (1993) *The Silence of the Body*. Farrar Straus Giroux.

Ceronetti, G. (2009) *Insetti senza frontiere*. Adelphi.

Ceronetti, G. (2014) *L'occhio del barbagianni*. Adelphi.

Ceronetti, G. (2015) *Tragico tascabile*. Adelphi.

Ceronetti, G. (2017) *Messia*. Adelphi.

Cioran, E. (2012) *Drawn and Quartered*. Arcade Publishing.

Clemens, J. and Pettman, D. (2004) *Avoiding the Subject: Media, Culture and the Object*. Amsterdam University Press.

Colli, G. (1977) *Dopo Nietzsche*. Adelphi.

Colli, G. (1980) *Scritti su Nietzsche*. Adelphi.

Colli, G. (1982) *La ragione errabonda*. Adelphi.

Corcuff, P. (2007) 'Jean Baudrillard n' a pas eu lieu', *Le Monde*.

Crary, J. (2013) *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. Verso.

Davidson, H. (2023) 'China foreign minister warns of potential for conflict with US and hails Russia ties', *The Guardian*, 7 March.

Debord, G. (1990) *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle; or 'Treatise on Secrets'*. Verso.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*. Continuum.

DeLillo, D. (2020) *The Silence*. Picador.

Donzelot, J. (2011) 'Patasociology at the University of Nanterre', *Cultural Politics*, 7(3), pp. 359–370.

Dorn, E. (1993) *Way West Stories, Essays & Verse Accounts, 1963-1993*. University of Michigan Press.

Eco, U. (2015) *Internet, Social Media e Giornalismo, YouTube*. Available at: youtube.com/watch?v=u10XGPuO3C4.

Fabbri, P. (2018) *Jean Baudrillard. L'irriducibile. Conferenza di Paolo Fabbri (Fondazione Primoli 13 marzo 2018)*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5_g6FWIOjA.

Fagioli, T. and De Conciliis, E. (2018) 'Reinventing the Real: A Conversation with Marine Dupuis Baudrillard', *Kritikos*, 15(Summer).

Fernandez, M. (2020) *Cuadernos de todo y nada*. Corregidor.

Fichte, J. G. (1994) *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings, 1797-1800*. Hackett Publishing Company.

Foucault, M. (1971) *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History, The Foucault Reader*.

Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and punish*. Vintage Books.

Foucault, M. (2003) *'Society Must Be Defended': Lectures at the Collège de France, 1976-77*. Picador.

Fuller, S. (2018) *Post-truth. Knowledge as a Power Game*. Anthem Press.

Galip, i. (2022) *Creative Digital Labour of Meme Making*. University of Edinburgh.

Gane, M. (1991a) *Baudrillard: critical and fatal theory*. Routledge.

Gane, M. (1991b) *Baudrillard's Bestiary, Baudrillard's Bestiary*.

Gane, M. (2000) *Jean Baudrillard. In Radical Uncertainty*. Pluto Press.

Gane, M. (2011) 'Baudrillard's Radicalization of Fetishism', *Cultural Politics*, 7(3), pp. 371–390.

Gane, M. (2017) 'Jean Baudrillard's Unfinished Project', *Lo Sguardo - Rivista di filosofia*, (23), pp. 299–312.

Geniusas, S. (2004) 'Baudrillard's raw phenomenology', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 35(3), pp. 293–309.

Genosko, G. (1994) *Baudrillard and Signs*. Routledge.

Goethe, J. W. (1876) *Faust. A Tragedy. The Second Part*. Brockhaus.

Goethe, J. W. (1998) *Maxims And Reflections*. Penguin Books.

Groys, B. (2004) 'Les corps d'Abou Ghraib', in *Cahier Baudrillard*. L'Herne, pp. 268–274.

Guillaume, M. (2019) *La philosophie poétique de Jean Baudrillard*. Descartes & Cie.

Harlan, C. and Pitrelli, S. (2021) 'Italy begins enforcing one of the world's strictest workplace vaccine mandates, risking blowback', *The Washington Post*, 16 October.

Hegarty, P. (2004) *Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory*. Continuum.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1952) *Philosophy of Right*. Clarendon Press.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford University Press.

Heidegger, M. (1977) *The Question Concering Technology and Other Essays*. Garland Publishing.

Heidegger, M. (1986) *Gesamtausgabe, 48 - Nietzsche: Der europäische Nihilismus*. Vittorio Klostermann.

Heidegger, M. (1991a) *Nietzsche, Volumes I and II*. Harper Collins.

Heidegger, M. (1991b) *Nietzsche, Volumes III and IV*. Harper Collins.

Heidegger, M. (1996) *Being and Time*. State University of New York Press.

Heidegger, M. (2001) *Zollikon Seminars. Protocols—Conversations—Letters*. Edited by M. Boss.

Northwestern University Press.

Heidegger, M. (2002) *Off the Beaten Track*. Cambridge University Press.

Heidegger, M. (2004) *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*. Indiana University Press.

Hern, A. (2017) 'Netflix's biggest competitor? Sleep', *The Guardian*, 18 April.

Hugill, A. (2012) *'Pataphysics: A Useless Guide*. MIT Press.

Jarry, A. (1996) *Exploits & Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician*. Exact Change.

Jarry, A. (2011) *The Ubu Plays. Ubu Rex, Ubu Cuckolded, Ubu Enchained*. Grove Press.

Jung, C. G. (1981) *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Routledge.

Jünger, E. (2013) *The Forest Passage*. Telos Press.

Kant, I. (1934) *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by N. Kemp Smith. Macmillan.

Klee, P. (1961) *Paul Klee Notebooks: Volume 1, The Thinking Eye*. Lund Humphries.

Kraus, K. (1912) *Pro domo et mundo*. Albert Langen.

Kraus, K. (1918) *Nachts*. Leipzig.

Kurzweil, R. (2005) *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. Duckworth Overlook.

Kurzweil, R. (2024) *The Singularity Is Nearer*. Random House.

L'Yvonnet, F. (2013) *L'Effet Baudrillard. L'élégance d'une pensée*. Les Éditions Nouvelles François Bourin.

Latouche, S. (2019) *Remember Baudrillard*. Fayard.

Latour, B. (2003) 'The promises of constructivism', *Chasing Technology : Matrix of Materiality*, 46, pp. 27–46.

Latour, B. (2004) 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30(2), pp. 225–248.

Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford University Press.

Leonelli, L. (2007) *La Séduction Baudrillard*. École Nationale Supérieure des Beux-Arts.

Lettig, D. (2021) *Draghi: Anti-vaccine is 'appeal to die'*, *Euractiv*. Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/draghi-anti-vaccine-is-appeal-to-die/.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (2021) *Wild Thought*. The University of Chicago Press.

Lichtenberg, G. C. (2012) *Philosophical Writings*. State University of New York Press.

Lotringer, S. (2010) 'Introduction: Domination and Servitude', in *The Agony of Power*. Semiotext(e), pp. 7–32.

Lyotard, J. F. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. University of Minnesota Press.

Lyotard, J. F. (1993) *Libidinal economy, Theories of contemporary culture*. Athlon Press.

Mandeville, B. (1970) *The Fable of the Bees*. Penguin Books.

Mauss, M. (1990) *The Gift. The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*. Routledge.

McLuhan, M. (1964) *Understanding Media*. MIT Press.

Meinong, A. (1960) 'The theory of objects', in Chisholm, R. M. (ed.) *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*. Free Press.

Miller, C. (2022) *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology*. Scribner.

Monod, J. (1971) *Chance and Necessity. An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Muray, P. (2016) *Cari jihadisti*. Miraggi Edizioni.

Musil, R. (1990) *Precision and soul : essays and addresses*. Edited by B. Pike and D. S. Luft. University of Chicago Press.

Musil, R. (1995a) *The Man Without Qualities. Volume I*. Translated by S. Wilkins and B. Pike. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Musil, R. (1995b) *The Man Without Qualities. Volume II*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Musil, R. (1999) *Five Women*. D.R. Godine.

Nancy, J.-L. (1993) *The birth to presence*. Stanford University Press.

201

Nancy, J.-L. (2000) *Being Singular Plural*. Stanford University Press.

Nancy, J.-L. (2002) *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*. University of Minnesota Press.

Nietzsche, F. (1954) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for None and All*. The Viking Press.

Nietzsche, F. (1966) *Beyond Good and Evil. Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Random House.

Nietzsche, F. (1967a) *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Random House.

Nietzsche, F. (1967b) *The Will To Power*. Vintage Books.

Nietzsche, F. (1974) *The Gay Science*. Edited by W. Kaufmann. Vintage Books.

Nietzsche, F. (1986) *Human, All Too Human*. Cambridge University Press.

Nietzsche, F. (1997a) *Daybreak*. Cambridge University Press.

Nietzsche, F. (1997b) *Untimely Meditations*. Cambridge University Press.

Nietzsche, F. (2005) *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*. Cambridge University Press.

Norris, C. (1990) 'Lost in the Funhouse. Baudrillard and the Politics of Post-modernism', in Boyne, R. and Rattansi, A. (eds) *Postmodernism and Society*. Macmillan.

Norris, C. (1992) *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals, and the Gulf War*. Lawrence & Wishart.

Pawlett, W. (2007) *Jean Baudrillard*. Routledge.

Pawlett, W. (2020) 'Foreword by William Pawlett', in *Stratagem of the Corpse. Dying with Baudrillard, a Study of Sickness and Simulacra*. Anthem Press.

Perniola, M. (2007) 'Jean Baudrillard', *Il Manifesto*, 7 March.

Pettman, D. (2002) *After the Orgy: Toward a Politics of Exhaustion*. State University of New York Press.

Pettman, D. (2008) 'A Belated Invitation to the Orgy', in *Fatal Strategies*, pp. 7–22.

Pettman, D. (2016) *Infinite Distraction*. Polity Press.

Pettman, D. (2021) *Peak Libido. Sex, Ecology and the Collapse of Desire*. Polity Press.

Pitkin, H. F. (1967) *The Concept of Representation*. University of California Press.

Plato (1997) *Complete Works*. Hackett Publishing Company.

Queneau, R. (1943) *Les Ziaux*. Gallimard.

Rilke, R. M. (1979) *The Complete French Poems*. Graywolf Press.

Rimbaud, A. (2005) *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters*. University of Chicago Press.

Ritchie, S. (2021) 'Did Covid-19 escape from a Wuhan lab? Here's what we know', *The New Statesman*, 26 May.

Schatzki, T. R., Knorr-Cetina, K. and Savigny, E. von (2001) *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. Routledge.

Schmitt, C. (2004) *Legality and Legitimacy*. Duke University Press.

Schnitzler, A. (1967) *Aphorismen und Betrachtungen*. S. Fischer.

Schopenhauer, A. (1966) *The World as Will and Representation*. Dover Publications.

Severino, E. (2016) *The Essence of Nihilism*. Verso.

Simmel, G. (1950) 'The Sociology of Georg Simmel', in Wolff, K. H. (ed.). The Free Press.

Simmel, G. (1971) *On Individuality and Social Forms*. The University of Chicago Press.

Simmel, G. (1978) *The Philosophy of Money*. Routledge.

Simmel, G. (1991) *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*. University of Illinois Press.

Simmel, G. (1992) *Gesamtausgabe / 11 Soziologie : Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*. Edited by O. Rammstedt. Suhrkamp.

Simmel, G. (2009) *Sociology. Inquiries Into the Construction of Social Forms*. Brill.

Simmel, G. (2016) *Che cos'è per noi Kant?* Edited by F. Valagussa. Castelvecchi.

Sokal, A. and Bricmont, J. (1998) *Fashionable Nonsense. Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*. Picador.

Sorrentino, P. (2018) *Loro*. Feltrinelli.

Starobinski, J. (1971) *Les mots sous les mots: les anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure*. Gallimard.

Trabant, J. (2004) *Vico's New Science of Ancient Signs: A Study of Sematology*. Routledge.

Valagussa, F. (2015) 'Kant. The Transcendental and the Harmony of Faculties', *Con-Textos Kantianos-International Journal of Philosophy*, (2), pp. 72–85.

Valery, P. (1970) *Collected Works of Paul Valery, Volume 14, Analects*. Princeton University Press.

Vattimo, G. (2019) *Beyond the Subject: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Hermeneutics*. State University of New York Press.

Vattimo, G. and Rovatti, P. A. (2013) *Weak Thought*. State University of New York Press.

Vazquez, M. (2020) *Trump now says he wasn't kidding when he told officials to slow down coronavirus testing, contradicting staff, Cnn Politics*. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/22/politics/donald-trump-testing-slow-down-response/index.html.

Vico, G. (1948) *The New Science*. Cornell University Press.

Vico, G. (2002) *The First New Science*. Cambridge University Press.

Virilio, P. (2009) *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. Semiotext(e).

Wittgenstein, L. (1980) *Culture and Value*. Blackwell.

Zima, P. V. (2010) *Modern/Postmodern. Society, Philosophy, Literature, Rethinking the French City*. Continuum.

Zizek, S. (2020) *Hegel in a Wired Brain*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Žižek, S. (2002) *Welcome to the Desert of the Real. Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates., New Zealand Sociology*. Verso.

Žižek, S. (2020) *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*. OR Books.

Žižek, S. (2021) *Heaven in disorder*. OR Books.

Zweig, S. (2011) *Holderlin, Kleist, and Nietzsche: The Struggle with the Daemon*. Routledge.