MUTUAL VERTIGO

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Jean Baudrillard: *Selected Writings*. Edited, with an introduction by Mark Poster. California: Stanford University Press; 1988 vii + 230 pp. $32.50 cloth; $10.95 paper.

> "A strange arrogance compels us not only to possess the other, but also to penetrate his secret, ..."
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> <div style="text-align:right">Baudrillard[1]</div>

Mark Poster's introduction and edited selections of the writings of Jean Baudrillard fail this "strange arrogance." The book is useful if one wishes to scan nine selections, spanning seventeen years, all in two hundred twenty one pages; but it misses the very "object form" from which it evolves by including a grossly incomplete index and a blunt introduction. Both Poster, the volume editor, and Jacques Mourrain, the translator of three selections, have misunderstood or been unaware of works of Baudrillard that might have helped them write a more updated and informed introduction, as well as avoid a simply senseless translator's note. Baudrillard's *L'Autre par lui-même*[2] and "From The System of Objects to The Destiny of Objects"[3] could have given Mourrain and Poster an edge.

The introduction misses and overstates much about Baudrillard's work. For instance, contrary to Poster's assertion, Baudrillard has not "developed a theory" (1)[4]; rather he continually challenges theory by constructing an event out of theorizing the manner in which he ap-

proaches the object of his critique. Nor does Baudrillard "theorize from the vantage point of the new media" (1), for him the media is "what finally forbids response, what renders impossible any process of exchange" (208). Baudrillard plays with the media and theorizes from the symbolic benefit of a de-volition within the masses. This is his fragile disappearance strategy, and the irony of a "vantaged" point (213). Poster also understates Baudrillard's position when he argues that for Baudrillard, "culture is now dominated by simulation." (1) To Baudrillard, the concept of culture is no longer meaningful, and even more, "culture" and "simulation" are a bridging of a nonexistent gap altogether (86). Yet, as has happened in the neo-geo New York art scene (to the dismay of Baudrillard), America prepares a "culture" of Baudrillard's simulations. How? As this introduction attempts: by liquidating all referentials (167), feigning an understanding, and short-circuiting that precarious breaker of the "objective irony" in all systematics.[5]

Once past the introduction and into the texts of Baudrillard himself, one is quickly pulled into a process that participates in and simultaneously challenges a purely "horizontal era of events without consequences." (198) In his earlier pieces Baudrillard begins to expose the strained concepts of a protectionist reality, and from these pages one begins to see the development of several major terms; fault terms that were virtually ignored in the introduction.

In *The System of Objects*[6] (1968), for example, Baudrillard is concerned with the possibility of an understanding of "consumption" from a standpoint of a languaged animal. What we find in these pages is a break from the system's own mechanism of survival: tautological opulence. We are left with the crucial introduction of the concept of "lack" (22-25). The "lack" that Baudrillard notices is between the consumption of the "sign" and the "pleasure" it should bring (cp.,22,54). In *Consumer Society* (1970) the autonomous mechanisms of consumption are turned upon the individual as consumer. In this selection we are faced with Baudrillard's focusing on the object, obedient objects that cause to proliferate spaces of absence from one individual to another, and that are all neatly endowed in their own "digest" (29,35). In addition, seduction is depicted as the intricacies of disciplined consumption which accept the consumer's freedom by dazzling that freedom with the litany of needs.

For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (1972) is a difficult but key piece in understanding the thought of the later Baudrillard. The selection, and the book from which it is taken, collects the major points of Baudrillard's earlier works and illustrates the development of those idioms that have come to be most closely associated with his work and thought. Perhaps most important to this development is the way in which *Critique* analyzes the sign form, tracing it through the stages of the logics of value and transforming a critique of Marxist theory into a critique of the possibility of theorizing in a system at all (64-65). *Critique* forces the object form ("the abstract equivalence of utilities") to shatter

(68,80). This shattering of the object form is developed in Baudrillard's works as the "duplication of the objects" (116); as "Interpretation" (149); and the special effect of passing "on the side of the object" (204). In *Critique* Baudrillard also expounds on the concept of the "code," which is presented in *The System of Objects* as the violent fissure between the consumption of the sign and the pleasure that consumption should bring. The "lack" found in the pleasure that is not brought, necessitates a conceptualization of the logic of the code. Unfortunately, yet true to form Baudrillard proceeds to define the code within the relation of lack, such that we are faced with a self-destructive definition. A tentative definition of the code would present the code as a language form assuming the lack of reciprocity between object and subject. It is an implosive "reality principle" where interference is not external with respect to the lacking object subject reciprocity, but a guarantee of a posited and anticipated discourse of it's own justification. Object and subject are thus obviated within and by the same language form. In short, the "code" is a "reality principle" that absorbs its own meaning, that is immune to the critique of reciprocity, and is classified as an assumption of its own axiomatics (110). Such is the "repressive simulation" of the code (114).

In *The Mirror of Production* (1975) Baudrillard further speculates on the code. Here, the "effect of quality" is shown to be an inherent deformation of the code. In this light Baudrillard attempts a reversibility of the bad dialectical relations of Marxist conceptual headlocks (103). *Mirror* marks Baudrillard's parting of the ways with all "repressive simulation," and with the need for the installation of the "code" as fulfillment of "lack" (25,45,84).

If one had access to one selection in this collection, then *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976) would be the most instructive since it shows the limits of the "effects of the system"; a system of exchange value that has already been saturated from the critique in *Mirror* (99). Yet, *Symbolic Exchange* goes much further. It is an example of theorizing in overdrive, which as the gear that transmits a greater speed to the drive shaft than provided by the engine seeks, in its acceleration, a "symbolic exchange" between system and critique. Such an exchange is believed by Baudrillard to occur only at the limits of theorization. An example of this is the possibility to "form" a death (124), which is not the "pathetic conclusion" (5) that Poster comments, but an extreme utopia of risk in the overdriven act of the subjects' theoretical passage to an object. The "pathetic" as Poster should have noticed, if he had scanned his selections more thoroughly, belongs to the social emotionalism of hierarchies.[7] *Symbolic Exchange* is a viable exercise in a passage of reversibility, which was begun in *The Mirror of Production*, and which opens up theory to a different metaphysics, by realizing the impossibility of a continued negotiation with the real. What Poster qualifies as "bleak fatalism"; "pathetic," "totalizing"; "hyperbole" and "vague formulations"

(5) unfortunately belong to the real; something Baudrillardian theory left a long time ago.[8]

As reality was held hostage in *Symbolic Exchange*, interpretation is sabotaged in *Seduction* (1979). Through Kierkegaard, the multi-dimensional master of seduction, Baudrillard learns that intimate release has no "more" (the real) challenge. One can only wait and see if Baudrillard himself will someday soon"(when this) affair (has) progressed so far...(break) it off without himself having made the slightest advances", "and then we in wanting to tell of it, realize, ...there (is) nothing to tell."[9] Such a phase of seduction could be the most graceful of phase-outs of seduction itself. "There is an art of disappearing, a way of modulating it and making it into a state of grace. This is what I'm trying to master in theory."[10] In *Seduction*, Baudrillard prepares a field to encounter his critics; a field where he seduces through the challenge of responses that reaches beyond regulated laws and fundamental values: "To challenge or seduce is always to drive the other mad, but in a mutual vertigo: madness from the vertiginous absence that unites them, and from their mutual involvement" (161). Poster avoids this challenge, and also limits the readers by his timid request for a greater degree of referentiality and "epistemology" (8). Instead, Baudrillard, tired of the fragility of sociology and philosophy of the "question/answer type" (142) opts for a "dissent of a higher logical type than that to which it is opposed." (122)

In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) we arrive at this dissent and "metastases"[11] (50) of the code into models and images. In contrast to the second-order simulations in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, which were operations of the code (182) in the context where the real was still wavering and put into play (121), in *Simulacra and Simulation*, production, signification, consciousness, the unconscious, and political economy are spiraled into a "hyperreality of floating values" and encounter theory and practice (121,122). In this inaugurated "realm beyond economic value" (113) referentials are artificially resurrected for the sake of theory and only for the sake of theory. The point Baudrillard conveys is that besides this artificial resurrection, there simply is not any theorizing left to do. The seduction and challenge of "drawing the other within your area of weakness, which will also be his or her's" is the strategy of Baudrillard that Poster cannot accept (162). *Simulacra and Simulation* throws us into the depths of the Baudrillardian sea. Yet he is too fair, and again, we are not allowed to drown because theoretical life-preservers are thrown to us: nostalgia (171); parody (177); the critical obsession with power (180), and melancholy (180).

After meeting theory on the narrow rescue of mutual vertigo and vertiginous absence (161), we are presented, in *Fatal Strategies* (1983), with the demise of the power of theory in its pre-paraphysical, and post-pataphysic stages. It is these boundaries which most disturb the critics of Baudrillard. They cannot decide to which of them, they, as critics,

belong. *Fatal Strategies* presents the "object" in one of its final stages, which is a development of the successive mentions of the object throughout the previous selection, and missed by Poster in his Introduction, and Notes. In these selected works of Baudrillard, the object begins as designating and classifying, and transforms into a sign of a relation (22), then shows itself as a proliferation of absent relations adopted as a need (29,44). The object was then shown to be a "promise of an ideal" extended to the individual for itself (66,69). In *Fatal Strategies*, the Baudrillardian travels with the object and arrives at the "ecstatic form of the pure object" in its strategic triumph over the subject (185). These last objects are beyond their own essence, and are caught in their own strategies. This twist is the fatality of present theory. Baudrillard thus presents us with a drastic possibility of theoretic catastrophe by showing how the characteristic of the "more" in "fashion," "art," "television," and the social cease "to be relative to their opposite ... (thus becoming) positively sublime" (186). Baudrillard has grasped the concept of the sublime, by letting it pass into the subliminal. Such a "fault" is caused by the catastrophe of things which are theorized between "dead point" and "pure event." This apocalyptic obscenity, a masochistic and not sadistic irony, constantly rides on the white horse of theory; Baudrillard's included (197). What is left at the orginary point of this theory/anti-theory are a few weak shelters: disappearance, wit, the irony of risk, and second events; all of which might, as Kafka's Messiah, be one day too late. The last selection in the volume under review is: *"The Masses*: The Implosion of the Social in the Media" (1985). The first page in this selection tends to be similar to Baudrillard's earlier style that disorients us, until we are reminded that Baudrillard is just making a "spectacle" out of a second approach to themes dealing with the media (202). With a brief mention of McLuhan's technological optimism, and Enzenberger's hybrid socialist-techno-humanism, we are quickly and gracefully plummeted beyond the social altogether (188). Through this entire last section it is very difficult not to notice that in some very ironic way the media is the gaze of the masses. If this is so, who could be left to be watched or gazed upon?

However thoroughbred these impressive selections may be, they are unable to canter, let alone gallop, reined in as they are by the lack of a well-conceived index and by the absence of a "violent" introduction (124). Any index for such a selection of writings should be very careful to point out important idioms used by the author, especially when these usages change and take on different forms as his thought develops. Yet this volume's index repeatedly fails to show an understanding of many such crucial terms. I have found thirty-five example of important terms ranging from "aesthetic" to "Zeuxis" that have not been indexed. A complete list of these missed items would be dizzying, because they make up the substratum of Baudrillard's most recognized theories. Some examples are, the concept of "lack", which is missed in *The System of*

Objects and *Consumer Society*; the concepts of "object form," "simulation models," "simulation logic", the "law of the code," and the concept of "concepts," all crucial terms missed in *The Political Economy of the Sign*. The concepts "code effect" and "repressive simulation" are missed in *The Mirror of Production*. The important concept of the "paraphysical," found in the pivotal selection *Symbolic Exchange and Death* was never indexed nor referred to in the introduction. Its sister concept, the "pataphysic" found in *Fatal Strategies* was also missed. These examples go on and on, and preempt any criticism of Poster that Baudrillard "fails to define his major terms." (7) Major terms can only be understood if one finds them in the text, and can chart their uses.

To what phase of the "image" will this encounter with a collection of the works of Baudrillard belong? A simulation phase? A hyperreal phase? In whatever phase, we may be certain that Baudrillard's pataphysic theorizing will not receive a paraphysial critique from the American academe. Once the "dead point" (190) of all response is crossed, where can challenge lie but in fragile disclosures: as the finger of Cratylus against the flux of becoming; the "constellations" of Benjamin against the temporal digestion of meaning; and the Cyreniacism of theory, as in the works of Jean Baudrillard?

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Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, *Please Follow Me*, trans. Dany Barash and Danny Hatfield (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988) p. 76.

2. Jean Baudrillard, *L'Autre par lui-même* (Paris: Editions Galilee, 1987). Translated, and erroneously entitled *The Ecstasy of Communication*, by Bernard & Caroline Schutze, (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988), pp. 87-88. The Italian translation, *L'altro visto da sé*, trans., Maria Teresa Carbona, (Genova: Costa & Nolan), 1987, remains closer to Baudrillard's original title, which is unfolded and hinted to within the text. I would refer the reader to note pages 21, 41, and 65-66 of the Semiotext(e) edition for the allusions to the original title.

3. Jean Baudrillard, pp. 77-95.

4. All page numbers enclosed within parentheses are references to Jean Baudrillard: *Selected Writings*, edited, with an introduction by Mark Poster, (California: Stanford University Press, 1988).

5. On this point, see Jean Baudrillard, "Interview" in *Block* 14 (1988): 8-10; and "Chez Jean," Baudrillard interview with Eduardo Cicelyn, *Strip*, anno 1, n. 2., Giugno (1988), 13.

6. Italicized titles are references to the *Selected Writings* edition.

7. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. trans. Charles Levin, (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), p. 40.

8. A similar qualification of Baudrillardian "terminology" was recently expanded upon by Robert Hughes in "The Patron Saint of Neo-Pop," *New York Review of Books*, June 1, 1989). Hughes' approach, though more unscholarly than that of Poster, spins to a higher pitch of sentimental Gentilian somnambulism, believes "culture construct" free.

9. Soren Kierkegaard, *Diary of a Seducer*, trans. Gerd Gillhoff. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1966), pp. 5-6.

10. Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault* (New York: Semiotext(e) 1987), pp. 128.

11. Jean Baudrillard, p. 50.