

# SIGN AND COMMODITY: ASPECTS OF THE CULTURAL DYNAMIC OF ADVANCED CAPITALISM

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It is no accident that Marx should have begun with an analysis of commodities when, in the two great works of his mature period, he set out to portray capitalist society in its totality and to lay bare its fundamental nature. For at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of the commodity-structure.

G. Lukacs  
*History and Class Consciousness*

Ideology can no longer be understood as an infra-superstructural relation between a material production (system and relations of production) and a production of signs (culture, etc.) which expresses and marks the contradictions at the "base". Henceforth, all of this comprises, with the same degree of objectivity, a general political economy (its critique), which is traversed throughout by the same form and administered by the same logic.

Jean Baudrillard  
*For A Critique of the  
Political Economy of the Sign*

## I

### Baudrillard and Frankfurt

In the affluent conformism of the post-war boom, and now again in the post-60s disillusionment of our own mean-spirited and re-disciplined times, critical social thought has revived the Frankfurt School's spectre of a capitalism that has finally mastered its own historicity and so liquidated any endogenous capacity it may once have had for redemptive self-transformation.

It is perhaps noteworthy that the latest avatars of this gloomy entelechy have emerged not from Germany, the land of its birth, but from France; and, at that, from among an intellectual generation that cut its teeth on a polemic against humanized Hegel and dedicated itself thereafter to the philosophical dismantling of all the other crumbling remnants of Western logocentrism.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this strange paradigmatic cross-over are partly political. In post-Hitler Germany, the neo-Kantian and anti-Romantic turn taken by critical theory under Habermas and his followers was predicated on the recovery of evolutionary optimism. That (West) German thought since then has been able to sustain this liberal mood is in some measure due to the relative persistence in that country of the extra-Parliamentary activism initiated during the 60s. In France to the contrary, May 68 was a bolt from the stars, as deliriously festive and

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total as it was ephemeral: hard even to recall in the business-as-usual normality which so rapidly and depressingly followed. Faced afterwards with a choice between the PCF (and *Union des Gauches*) and Gaullism, it is not surprising that radical French theory should begin to display signs of ultimatism and despair.

But besides these matters of context, French thought in its moment of deconstruction has also come to display profound conceptual parallels with the earlier enterprise of negative dialectics. Both reflect the outcome of a would-be synthetic meditation on Marx, Nietzsche and Freud; both share a mortal fear of the social world's ideological self-enclosure; and both exhibit a modernist determination to demolish systematicity, even at the level of critique itself. For that reason, and despite their otherwise irreconcilable epistemic differences, post-structuralism today enjoys an almost privileged access to the previously inadmissible (because Hegelian and anti-objectivist) terrain of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, and thus also to those thinkers' tragic reading of modern history as the story of Enlightenment's ineluctable progress towards total unfreedom.

Perhaps the clearest and certainly the most sociologically explicit instance of what one might call neo-Marcusian reasoning in contemporary French thought is the work of Jean Baudrillard.<sup>2</sup>

There is admittedly a world (i.e. an ontology) of difference between Marcuse's one-dimensional society and Baudrillard's code-dominated order of generalized exchange. In the praxis-based categories of the former it is instrumental reason which is identified as the glacially reifying agent; whereas in the latter, founded on a neo-Durkheimian anthropology of moral reciprocity, the culprit is commodity semiosis and the universalized commutability of values. But at a deeper level these critical visions converge in their common projection of advanced capitalist society as a model whose fixed determinations propel the collectivity towards a kind of slow but painless spiritual death. Baudrillard, like Marcuse, has also tried to provide psychoanalytic ground for this dystopian teleology by demonstrating its consonance with the morbid promptings of a systematically repressed desire.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Baudrillard's sociological investigations into mass-mediatised consumerism, the main substance of his *oeuvre*, essentially pursue lines of enquiry previously opened up by the Frankfurt School. The guiding assumptions are identical: that the mass cultural instance has become crucial to social reproduction, that it represents indeed a strategic built-in mechanism for ensuring the social order's real status through all the incipient upheavals it continues to induce, and that this is why the Revolution (if the term retains any meaning) has perhaps permanently missed the historical boat.

There is no doubt that Baudrillard's exploration of these themes is path-breaking. His problematization of what one might call commodity semiosis in the age of televised repetition represents in many respects a significant advance over Benjamin, and certainly over the North American mass society critics he also appropriates. More than any other contemporary thinker he has succeeded in placing the changed articulation of culture and economy in advanced

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capitalist society firmly on the theoretical agenda. But ultimately, I would argue, the theoretical power of his analysis is restricted by the same quasi-fatalistic circularity that vitiated the Frankfurt School's original civilizational lament. In Derridian terms: however decentred and indeterminate, the code that has allegedly triumphed is nevertheless a logos, particularly when identified with death; and such an ascription must itself fall prey to the suspicion of logocentrism. Otherwise put: we do not escape the identity principle simply by identifying the *weltgeist* as a corpse.

More pragmatically, any representation of social reality as culturally (and therefore politically) enclosed in the unidimensionality of a singular psychic space — with Baudrillard this is structural, abstract and at the second degree — is vulnerable to the counterfactual experience of 'actual' history. Theory must be adequate to explain and account for global disturbances like those of the 60s which shake the system of hegemony to its foundations. It is also important to explicate the normal play of cultural and moral politics — struggles over sexual, familial, aesthetic, religious, etc., modes and symbols — which continually mediate, sometimes explosively, the hierarchical force-field of competing material self-interests.

On this score, perhaps, it might be claimed that Baudrillard is in fact somewhat less undialectical than some of his Frankfurt forebears. Whereas in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* it is critical theory itself which must bear the full weight of opposition,<sup>4</sup> his own anthropological ontology of symbolic exchange comes close to endowing even the wholly reified world of *la société de consommation* with a principle of *internal* contradiction. Symbolic exchange, in the primordial forms of gift, festival, and sacrifice, can no more be repressed than language; and so the more the 'structural law of value' dessicates social space, the more its unsatisfied reciprocities, invested with repressed libidinal energy, come to haunt all the corners of social life, threatening constantly to disrupt the repetitive dumb-show that has come to monopolize the stage. Hence, for Baudrillard, the Days of May. And also, the profound significance of even such trivial occurrences as the great New York graffiti outbreak in 1972,<sup>5</sup> and (in a darker vein) of that more permanent round of media-attuned symbolic-come-actual political violence to which the Western world has become accustomed over the past two decades:

In the face of purely symbolic blackmail (the barricades of 68, hostage-taking) power falls apart: since it lives off my slow death, I oppose it with my violent death. And it is because we live off a slow death that we dream of a violent one. This very dream is intolerable to power.<sup>6</sup>

But if Baudrillard's social topology does provide a space for otherness and by the same token for crisis it nevertheless takes for granted that the prospect of class upheaval has passed and that capitalism's contradictoriness has come to be confined to the plane of its cultural determinations. Occluding the play of

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interests and *contra* Marx, transformation is only imaginable in this perspective as the quasi-magical irruption of *symbolic politics* so that we are left wondering whether Baudrillard has abandoned all hope of there being any actual exit from capitalism at all. Moreover, the antagonism he posits between symbolic and semiotic exchange<sup>7</sup> is pitched at so abstract indeed metaphysical a level that the whole theoretical construct, despite itself, effectively replicates the historical closure that forms the 'real' object of its critique. In this sense, however self-critically, Baudrillard's sociology remains trapped within the order of the simulacrum. Far from having smashed that mirror, his deconstruction of political economy serves ultimately only to shift its angle; so that where it once reflected the code of production it now reflects the code of the Code in a metapsychological simulation of the fourth degree.<sup>8</sup> Correlatively, and beyond a certain level of increasingly poetic abstraction, Baudrillard's formulations leave the mediated and conflictual institution of commodified culture in real history, and the actual politics to which that process gives rise, deeply in the theoretical shade.

Now what is noteworthy about the Baudrillardian circle, beyond the profundity of the pessimism which motivates it, is that it derives from a conceptual reduction at the centre of what is at the same time its most incisive socio-historical insight: namely, that in late capitalism sign and commodity have fused, giving rise to a new form of object (the sign-commodity) and a new order of domination (the ensemble of institutions and discourses which make up consumer culture) neither of which operate any longer according to the dictates of a strictly capitalist (i.e. economic) logic.

The problem is that in thematizing this development Baudrillard has conflated two quite different aspects of the process: the transformation of signs into commodities, ultimately represented by the rise of the culture industry, and the transformation, *via* mass marketing, fashion and status competition, of commodities into signs. It is the latter which interests him, providing as it does a framework for analyzing how the sacred and socially essential realm of symbolic value has been effectively evacuated by public discourse. But the other moment, the penetration of culture by the commodity form, which to be sure also has far-reaching consequences for systemic integration, needs to be separately considered. Not only does Baudrillard fail to do this, but by palming the commercial dimension of post-industrial cultural formation under the sign of the Sign, his attention is deflected from any direct consideration of the cultural dynamics associated with the broader and always ongoing process of commodification as such.

If, then, the Baudrillardian problematic is to be potentiated as the starting-point for a fresh round of enquiries and reflections on our historical situation, its crucial elisions must be addressed, and the totalism of the model correspondingly deconstructed in the light of the complexities which that would introduce. It is in that spirit, and with the admitted risk of falling back into the swamp of second-order, i.e. political economic simulation, that the following very preliminary considerations are put forward. Above all, their main aim is to

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open up the question of how, besides providing the basis for a new (post-class?) mode of hegemony, cultural commodification and the impact of commodification on culture can create the space for a kind of politics.

### II

#### Commodification as cultural provocateur

The expansionist principle built into the accumulation process, wherein market survival necessitates growth, has created a form of society whose development to an unprecedented degree has followed a path of constant upheaval and self-overhaul. Evidently, and here too capitalism has changed, the material contradictions of class and economy analyzed at length by Marx by no means exhaust the list of pertinent effects. For besides generating an ever more elaborate, differentiated and at the same time internationalized play of interest antagonisms, and mediating it throughout, capital has also tended to make socio-cultural waves as its imperatives and modalities have steadily imposed themselves and their restless dynamic over the entire surface and depth of social life.

The waves that have emanated from capitalist dynamism at the point of production are perhaps the most familiar aspects of this process. Since the dawning of industry it has been clear that the technological revolution ushered in by the Renaissance and installed by market society at the permanent centre of its production process was bound to transform not only the physical and social environments but the character of experience and the nature of ideology as well. The meditations of classical sociology on industrialism, bureaucracy and secularization were fixed precisely on that point; and critical theory's own rich discourse on technocracy, scientism, and instrumentality has in turn radicalized the analysis and incorporated it into the conventional weaponry of anti-capitalist critique. More recently, the rise of linguistic interests and the incipient obsolescence of print have led a non-Marxist current of thinkers culminating in Innis and McLuhan to push the question to a still deeper level by considering the cultural impact of ever-advancing technology within the communication process itself.

However, much less attention, and certainly less than deserved, has been given to the equally profound effects of capitalism's parallel but distinct tendency to extend the range of the price-system and the commodity form *per se* as a universal model for social relations. Even when posed moreover this issue has proved difficult to disentangle from the former, cross-cutting, problematic of technique. Thus, Lukacs' pathbreaking theory of reification effectively assimilated Marx's category of commodity fetishism to Weber's category of instrumental rationalization; and Benjamin's formative theses on the crisis of art similarly devolve, in the end, on a purely technological point. For all his semiological confluences, Baudrillard's singular achievement in developing and updating this line of thought has been finally to confront the cultural impact of

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commodification on something like its own, economically concatenated, ground: in terms, that is, of how an expanding circulation process has transformed the nature of social exchange.

But if Baudrillard has thereby helped emancipate the critical theory of culture from its one-sided pre-occupation with *techné* he has maintained its one-sidedness in another respect by thematizing the cultural dynamics of commodification (which he disdains to examine in any but its most contemporary forms) exclusively from the perspective of that process's conservative moment. Behind the problematic of contained consciousness to which his figuration of the sign-economy responds lies an archaic and paradoxically economistic formula according to which systemically derived ideology functions solely to pacify contradictions that emanate just as solely from interest antagonisms at the base. In Baudrillard's case, adhesion to this schema is contradicted by his explicit rejection of the orthodox class paradigm, and so here the occlusion of commodification's disruptive cultural moment actually leaves a logical gap.

To be intelligible, any system of hegemony must be understood in terms of what threatens it. But what threatens the social order guaranteed ideologically by the Code? Not, apparently, class conflict; and the *revanche* of symbolic exchange is itself a contingency beyond the scope of all control. We are left then with the mere tautology of a structural law of value for which self-replication — *la répétition* — is simply a mode of being. Missing from Baudrillard's account, in short, is an appreciation of how the whole normative apparatus of the sign-commodity, publicity and consumer culture is mobilized, at least in part, to manage the cultural tensions provoked by that same extension of the commodity-form which produced the one-dimensional world of consumerism itself. An analysis of the latter ought properly to begin therefore by considering in what these former might consist. In the first instance, let me suggest, the cultural tensions of commodification take the form of conflicts and struggles over mundane ideological values; and they are provoked all along the seam of economy and culture where the market's lust for expansion rubs up against pre-existing forms of normativity and moral value.

It would be misleading to represent this dialectic, as both conservative and radical opponents of the advancing market have been prone to do, in terms of a simple opposition between an amoral force and a moral object. For the freedom of commodities to circulate and the freedom of buyers and sellers to exchange what they will without external interference acquires the force of a moral argument; one whose central principle, the autonomized individual, rests its appeal on a whole ideological tradition, stretching from Reformed Christianity to contemporary libertarianism. This is not to deny that "personal freedom," like all ideologies, can be championed in stunningly obtuse or cynical bad faith. There are, rather, two points:

First, the social relations of commodity production — which in their immediate operation always centre on the nexus of exchange — are thoroughly saturated in the medium of normativity, without which they could not function. The market, as Durkheim would say,<sup>9</sup> rests on a moral basis. His argument can be

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extended. Established commerce requires not only that the *terms* of trade be contractually agreed upon, but also that there be a social consensus over *what* is for trade and over the *conditions* under which (if at all) that trade is allowed to take place.

Correlatively, and this is the second point, the constant advance of the market into symbolically loaded sectors of social life precipitates at the ideological level in each significant new instance a binary counterposition of pro-market liberalism and anti-market conservatism, communalism, nationalism, familism, etc., whose respective supporters fight like football teams to establish a succession of symbolic lines beyond which (temporarily at least) neither the market nor its enemies are allowed to encroach. Outcomes, whether in the form of truce, compromise or complete rout by one side or the other, are periodically arbitrated by the state on the terrain of law.

The perennial Canadian contest between partisans of free trade and protectionism provides a kind of paradigm case. Symbolically at stake in continental economic integration is the reduction, break-up and de-auratisation of a so-to-speak nationally sacralized signifier. Mainstream policy debate has been conducted in that context as a pragmatic but ideologized negotiation between nationalists and liberals over the extent to which the boundary of the border should be emphasized or de-emphasized in the face of a mounting circulation of goods, capital and information which constantly threaten to erode it. The point is not just that economic politics are lived out as ideology, but that the economic process has ideological ramifications which create the basis in itself for a form of politics.

From the very beginnings of capitalist development the sphere of consumption, originally and without irony conceived as private and public leisure,<sup>10</sup> has been especially subject to the eruption of such conflicts; and the more so the more an expanding productive complex has been able to extend and cultivate the range of enjoyments from orgasm to esteem that money there can buy. The court-imposed sumptuary laws of late Medieval absolutism and the seventeenth century puritan ban on theatre provide early as it were Thermidorean examples. More latterly, the growing sex and drug industries, each inconsistently and fuzzily divided into licit and illicit zones, have provided advanced capitalist society with its own nodal points of cultural tension.

Whether and in what degree to permit the commercial circulation of (addictive) stimulants and (degrading) sexual services in fact touches modern culture on a particularly sore nerve: our chronically inconsistent attitude towards the gratification and control of somatic impulse. Daniel Bell has even argued that this motivational ambivalence, which he attributes to a deepening antagonism between the emergent norms of leisure and work, represents capitalism's primary cultural contradiction.<sup>11</sup> His model of the problem is simplistic and ignores the role of consumerized commodification in its genesis. Nevertheless it remains true that particular issues of permissible consumption (today, par excellence, those pertaining to pornography and censorship) can resonate deeply with broader issues of social reproduction.

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It is precisely for this reason that the market, and still more the volatile liberal individualism that is its ideological shadow and harbinger, have such a dangerous edge. The normative limits, in some cases taboos, against which they press are not merely (in fact decreasingly) traditional survivals but symbolic markers of operant mechanisms of control. For the same reason, the moral issues of circulation tend to get linked up, and at the limit generalize on the plane of an ongoing social contest which draws in all the major ideological institutions and players over how the axial principles governing instituted normativity as a whole are to be defined.

Market pressure to shift the moral boundaries, to some degree a necessarily discontinuous process, always runs the risk of opening up a radical cultural space. But such openings, when order is finally restored, can themselves prove merely to have facilitated the passage from one matrix of market-regulating obedience to another. Such indeed has so far been the main axiological drama of post-war North America: first, the establishment of a surplus-repressive cultural hegemony; then its ultra-liberal dissolutions; and then, with suitable adjustments and continuing instabilities, "the return of traditional values" (to quote a 1976 liquor ad) and normalization.

If in late capitalism market penetration at the point of consumption (i.e. of private life) has become the main axis of what we can call circulation politics this is because the development of consumption as a productive force has replaced the geographical extension of the industrial system as the central motif of economic growth. Nevertheless it should be emphasized that analogous modalities of conflict continue to be generated at the point of production also. (A rigorous distinction needs to be made here between the properly cultural contradictions that attend the displacement of natural by exchange economy and the political-economic ones that flow from the economic inequality and exploitation which the market organization of production comes to install. We may think of the former contradictions as processual, the latter as structural, except that, just as in the case of the commodification process at work in the sphere of consumption, the normative inertia against which the spread of commodified production must contend has synchronic significance in the wider process of social reproduction as a whole).

The cultural dynamic associated with the initial establishment of capitalist production is of course largely played out. Artisanal ideals, local particularisms and traditional kin structures have lost their vitality in the industrialized heartlands and only resist the expanding system at its Third and Fourth World margins. However, even on mature capitalism's internal frontier, there are still two respects in which the market penetration of production is incomplete and continues to generate major cultural perturbations.

The first concerns the spread of economic exchange relations into such relatively (or ambivalently) non-commodified sectors of social activity as religion, the family, higher learning and the arts. In none of these diverse instances is the persistence of a pre-capitalist mode of association and work a mere case of culture-lag, for that mode is vital to their functioning as well as to

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the authenticity on which the credibility of their various products depends. Under the circumstances the market, whether through example, through the emergence of fully commercialized rivals, or through the actual mobilization of material interests, can only advance slowly. As it does so what comes to be established on each institutional site is a semi-permanent force-field of conflicting pressures internalized by the actors themselves (clergy, housewives, students, artists, etc.) as role-conflict and externalized as tendency struggles between competing moral/ideological currents and movements over the relative virtues of liberal accommodation and traditionalist hostility to the forces of progress.

These frictions are hard to regulate from above. Indeed they are exacerbated by the ambivalence with which they must be officially regarded. On the one hand, the charter values of Truth, Knowledge, Love, Beauty, etc., ceaselessly activated in value-transmitting institutions by the irritant of creeping commercialism, play an important rhetorical role in capitalism's traditional legitimation as a civilizing force; but when roused they can also function as genuine transcendentalists that provide troublesome reminders of loss, supercession and difference. Thus, for the churches of the West, where Christianity was thought to have been tamed, the rise of TV evangelism and other quintessentially business enterprise forms of priestcraft represents not merely an economic threat in the competition for congregations<sup>12</sup> but a repulsive counter-pole of 'bad religion' against which countervailing currents of increasingly radical transformism have been driven to define themselves. As one important corollary the previously cosy relation between organized religion and the capitalist state has begun to be radically upset.

Another, and perhaps more primordial, level at which structural resistance to the market penetration of production relations provides ongoing cultural conflict concerns the pressing into circulation of that strangest commodity of them all: labour-power. Quite apart from the shattering of traditional ties and attendant socio-cultural explosions that greeted the initial establishment of a mass-market for 'free labour', conflicts have continued to arise thereafter by virtue of that dynamic propensity of the market to redefine all work-functional energy as commercially available, regardless of the instituted status of its alienable owners. The resultant ideological dialectic is analogous with the one already described in the case of commodification at the point of consumption, except that here the codings at issue mark human agents, and indeed at the very juncture of their literal inscription within the differential orders of wealth and power.

Also, the process can cut more than one way. Where the change in status implied by the commodification of labour-power represents real demotion or loss of autonomy (one thinks here of small family farms and independent professionals) it will naturally be opposed by those affected in the romantically conservative name of the symbolic order thereby displaced. But the reverse can occur when labour market participation provides the basis for rescuing ascribed social categories (women, Catholics, blacks, etc.) from the even more subordinate

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status, outside the real world of exchange-economy, to which they would otherwise be culturally relegated. Here resistance to the expanding labour market comes from those already in it, while its newest recruits appeal to exchangist ideology against the continued application to themselves of the old, discriminatory norms.

Within the labour market itself, these latter, reflecting pre- (or trans-) capitalist hierarchies of race, age and gender, crystallize out as so many mechanisms of dominant group protectionism; which function to ensure that insofar as inferiorized categories are not excluded from paid employment altogether, they enter its equivalence system on markedly non-equivalent terms. The point here, as with the contradictions of commodification in general, is that over and above the material conflicts they provoke, such instances of unequal exchange are shot through with ideological contradictions which can become active in their own right. 'Minority' movements for equal opportunity that get blocked tend to radicalize by transvaluing that which has set the collectivity they represent stigmatically or condescendingly apart. Conversely, cultivation of cultural identity among the oppressed can trigger struggles for justice.

The ideological contradictions attending the application of equivalency norms to women in the face of patriarchal gender ascriptions have been particularly dense and slow to resolve. As early as the 1780's, Mary Woolstencraft showed how the abstract egalitarianism of possessive individualism could provide the basis for a critique of patriarchal restrictions on legal rights; and since then successive waves of feminist agitation, bolstered both by the gradual delegitimation of explicit male supremacism and by the increasing *de facto* normality of extra-domestic female employment have extended the battleground to every sphere of life. However, even more than in the case of racism, which frequently articulates with deeply rooted imperial/national legitimations of the state, the freedom of women to circulate on the same economic and social terms as men has also been resisted not just because it challenges an entrenched system of power and privilege, but because the patriarchal ideology that justifies that resistance (always circling around the claim that women are somehow "different") has continued, through all the vicissitudes of cultural liberalization, to play a crucial role in the maintenance and motivation of capitalist order. At this level, the need to sustain effective social mechanisms of biological reproduction has functioned largely as an alibi not only for the continued valorization of an asymmetrical gender code but also for the maintenance of the hierarchical family/class system which that code underwrites.

In the biblically resuscitated imaginary of early industrialism, the cultural identification of wage-labour with the 'masculine' roles of breadwinner and household head played a crucial pacifying role — over and above its various economic advantages to capital — by securing for the subordinated male worker a kind of compensatory, Adamic self-respect. At first, lacking the cumulated cultural force to wage a direct attack on the triadic fortress of family/church/school erected to protect this productivist nexus, the women's

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movement and the equivalency principle it championed gnawed away instead at juridicial inequalities in the fields of family law, civil rights and the franchise. Later, as the fortress began to collapse under the weight of more technically and socially developed conditions, it became possible for second wave feminism to crash over the sacred boundaries of hearth and home and finally confront the eternal verities of constructed gender difference at their intimate institutional source.

Here as elsewhere, however, capitalist modernization brings no guarantees of fundamental progress. For the displacement of work-centred religio-morality by and within the theatre of consumerism merely shifted the register of generic contradictions without ceasing to engage intractable issues of global integration and control. In this respect, it is of more than token significance that the book by Friedan<sup>13</sup> which did so much to popularize the modern women's movement in North America was based on an insider's critique of fashion magazines. Above all, it was the entry of signs, particularly iconic ones, into mass commercial circulation which gave patriarchal ideology a new lease on life by facilitating the spectacular passage of ideal femininity, as abstract signifier of status and desire, from the esoteric world of art to the ubiquitous iconography of mass culture and publicity. In that realm, the mythological female has come to embody not just the reward and condition for work but the promised happiness of consumption as well. Thus we see how a ruse of commodification has evolved a new obstacle to the process wherein the egalitarianism implicit in universalized market exchange strives, ever more powerfully, for independent realization.

The dialectic of course does not simply terminate in the victory of the *Playboy* syndrome; and a quarter century of feminist and market pressure, the latter operating by way of a pseudo-equalizing extension of sexual objectification to the male, has begun to seriously undermine consumerism's heavy masculinist ethos. Sexual bias will only finally be eliminated from consumer culture when the commodity's pleasure principle has become (dysfunctionally) polymorphous. So, even on the second-order plane of media imagery, the structural character of the contradiction is likely to persist.

### III

#### The sign-commodity and hegemonic regulation

The cultural provocations of commodification and the politics of normativity to which they give rise do not unfold in a vacuum but in a field already indexed to issues of hegemonic regulation and already occupied by that whole range of institutions from political parties and churches to showbiz and schools which are engaged in the collective formulation and dissemination of values.

There is no absolute sense in which any of these ideological apparatus can be considered structurally dominant<sup>14</sup> since their forms of influence are incommensurate and there is always a degree of free play between them in

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which the relations of inter-institutional force can radically and conjuncturally alter. Nevertheless there is one institutional complex within the superstructural configuration of advanced capitalism which can claim some kind of significant priority in that it is through the omnipresent refractions of its lens (in every sense a screening) that the whole process of cultural formation is continuously and publicly represented; and this is the one comprised by the (for the most part) commercially operated organs of mass communication along with all the related industries for the production of news, publicity and entertainment. In addition to its importance within the game of capitalist self-maintenance this sector is also significant systemically as the very incarnation of the commodity-form's seductive penetration of culture. And so it is precisely here, in the repressive desublimations and codifying biases of the culture/consciousness/sign industry that we confront the puzzle of commodification's other, i.e. conservative, integrative, dimension; and with that puzzle, as I have suggested, the broader mystery of how the universalizing commodity in its articulation with the cultural process establishes automatic mechanisms to regulate the normative disorder it simultaneously helps to provoke.

The automatic character of mass consumer culture's ideological operation needs to be stressed for it is the very hallmark of its work, an unprecedented indication that here at last is a consciousness-shaping institution which by its very nature functions functionally and can never get wholly out of hand. Explanations of this functionality in terms of class political manipulation — evocative phrases like Ewen's 'captains of consciousness' spring to mind — miss the point entirely. The rise of Madison Avenue, Disneyland, Tin Pan Alley and the whole corporate capitalist dream machine marks a decisive shift away from personalized ideological powers and the emergence, to the contrary, of a fully programmed cultural sphere wherein, to use Laingian terms, 'praxis' on both sides of the production/consumption divide has been effectively superseded by 'process'.<sup>15</sup> In effect, the powerful ideological inflection of commercial mass culture, whether in the direct form of culture-for-sale or at the second degree as selling-by-culture, is no more than a by-product of the accelerated circulation and increased surplus it makes possible. That inflection has therefore to be accounted for in the same way: in terms of the culture industry's inner economic determinations and the effect of these on its manner of processing and representing potentially hot cultural materials.

Baudrillard's crucial refinement of this thesis is that at the most basic level the ideological element of mass-mediated culture is determined by the interplay established there between mass-produced signs and mass-produced commodities; and, further, that this new alignment of sign and commodity is responsible not only for its systematically biased content but also, and more fundamentally, for bias in its very mode of signification as well. The saga of the sign he unfolds reads like a post-modernist update of alienation theory. Infinitely replicable, displaced from symbolic time and place, converted into commodities in their own right, signifiers become free to float independently of any organic communicative process; and in that condition like landless proletarians they

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rejoin social reality artificially in the form of the semiotically-endowed mass consumable commodity. Finally, as arbitrary markers linking the corporate game of product differentiation to the consumer merry-go-round of status and fashion, the signifying elements of design, packaging and promotion are drained of meaning in the self-referential play of their coded differences, which is exactly how, in deadening abstraction, they come to rule. Consciousness, in Baudrillard's account, is not so much falsified as headed off at the pass: the media factories of commercial semiosis prevail, in his pregnant phrase, by "fabricating non-communication."<sup>16</sup>

Without denying that such a tendency towards enforced meaninglessness is relentlessly at work, it would be premature however to declare it complete. Even advertising copy has become a zone of ideological controversy, and outraged responses to media stereotypes of women and ethnic groups testify to their continuing referential power. This being so, the axiological content of mass-mediated culture, and not just its semiological or, for that matter, sensory forms, remains relevant to an understanding of its cultural effectivity.

In fact at the level of communicative substance, the semio-economic determinations of the culture industry *doubly* stamp its effluvia as token-bearers of a would-be pacifying ideology. On the one hand, the subject-object inversion prescribed by their consistently consumerist mode of address occults class and makes a world without capital unimaginable. On the other hand, the pseudo-reconciliations of gender, nature/culture etc., made possible on that mythological basis, and positively reinforced by the premium placed on popularity values, serve to exorcize culturally-based sources of conflict as well. The former of these mechanisms, consumerism, is perhaps too familiar to require further elaboration. But the latter, which might be dubbed the middle-of-the-road effect, does call for some comment: not only as a comparatively unexamined topic,<sup>17</sup> but also because the consensualist modality of mass culture holds the key, or so I would argue, to the riddle of the commodity's limited but effective capacity for cultural self-control.

With respect to this issue, Baudrillard's insistence on the centrality of commodity semiosis within the mass cultural ensemble while not wrong is unhelpful, and further clarification depends on our disentangling the relation he condenses between that moment, represented by publicity, and its obverse, the commodification of signs, represented by entertainment. What we discover in fact is that within this same complex duality the order of effectivity is here reversed: in the case of cultural tension management as opposed to that of consumerist inversion it is entertainment rather than advertising that provides the dominant paradigm for a type of normative intervention which the culture industry, just by virtue of what it is, is driven to make.

The golden rule of show business is not to antagonize the audience, for that is the hand that feeds. Indeed, its members should be positively stroked, both as the fine people they are and for the decent or at any rate normal values they hold. To be entertained is above all to be made to feel good. Where the audience is live, local, and socially homogeneous, the collective totems must be very

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precisely acknowledged; but the more mass and therefore ideologically diverse it is, the more general the level of conventionality to which appeal must be made. Where there is not merely diversity but conflict, the task of flattering and in the same moment defining the collective identity of the audience is particularly difficult. The most cliché-ridden depths of popular mythology must then be plumbed, and awkward topics, controversial issues, and even potentially abrasive accentuations of genre and style must be avoided. A safe strategy for maximizing sales, box-office and ratings, in short, is to go mid-market and assiduously hug the middle-of-the-road.

Of course, if the entertainment industry, throughout all its branches, exhibited nothing but this entropic tendency, then its equally important need for constant thematic and stylistic innovation could not be met. But in this dialectic, the experimenter's licence to practice is granted in return for bearing all the economic risks, and successful novelties are rapidly co-opted, converted into mannerisms, and embalmed for later recycling as pseudo-historical nostalgia.

Only in popular music has this controlled oscillation ever gotten at all out of hand. The reason is not hard to find. Because of its intimate relation to ritual, emotion and physicality, music as the least directly representational art-form is also the least susceptible, whatever the technological and economic mode, to whole-scale serialization. It is the one sector of mass culture truly haunted by the return of symbolic exchange, and its history has constantly intertwined with that of the national, class and generational movements whose tragic, rebellious or celebratory moods it has been able, with fluctuating degrees of immediacy, to express. A central thread in this story has been the emergence of Afro-American music and its phased appropriation by successive layers of white working and middle class youth as a quasi-Dionysian dance cult. However, the point should not be over-emphasized; for even at this relatively organic level the major ruptures with middle-of-the-roadism — rag-time, jazz, swing, rock, reggae, punk — have been ambiguous in their meaning and ultimately subject to absorption by, or even *as*, the industry-dominated mainstream.

While the entertainment industry's penchant for self-censorship, cultural compromise and normative conventionalism has been a genuine expression of its own bad essence, these tendencies have of course been strongly reinforced by its ties with the whole machinery of mass media advertising. The degree to which advertising revenues directly pay the costs of mass entertainment varies from medium to medium, although given the extent of financial and functional interlock these differences may be misleading. In the limit case, American network TV and radio, the subsidy is total, and so too is the revenue-dependence of the medium on the size (and to a lesser degree the mix) of the audiences its programming can command; for it is on the ratings that advertising rates themselves rigidly depend. Here also, where they are compulsory, the conservative ideological implications of popularity values are most rigidly in evidence. Even less than media programmers, commercial sponsors cannot afford to alienate potential slices of their market. In effect, a double vigilance must

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therefore be maintained: on the one hand to ensure that only acceptable cultural risks are taken in satisfying and competing for the medium's own audience; and on the other to ensure that the advertising material itself hits absolutely the right consensual spot when addressing its target market.

In its actual functioning, advertising in fact represents the degree zero of show business audience technique. The flattery of the performer was at bottom always a form of self-promotion. In consumer advertising, however, the trick is refined by naturalizing and in the full sense normalizing the conventional cultural values which that flattery sought to confirm, and which, *mutatis mutandis*, are here invoked to valorize the product. The sales aim of commodity semiosis is to differentiate the product as a valid, or at least resonant, social totem, and this would be impossible without being able to appeal to taken-for-granted systems of cultural reference.

In this sense advertising must go even further along the path of popularity than entertainment. The latter, faced by embarrassing cultural divisions, can retreat to jokes and good humour. In so far as conventionality is torn or contorted by ongoing ideological contradictions advertising, however, is constrained to at least construct the appearance of a non-contradictory value-consensus. This is obviously the case where the product's intended market, e.g. for "feminine" cigarettes or "masculine" perfume, is by definition ambivalent toward the cultural codings *prima facie* associated with it. But in a more diffuse sense, the whole discourse of publicity, including, by extension, the subsidized programming which colonizes the mass consumer market as an audience, absolutely requires a normality-pole. The creative genius of advertising and its platforms of associated messages is that it is able to establish one, mythically; and in such a way, moreover, as to occlude the consumerist ontology that anchors it, to reconcile all the cultural antinomies of an unstable ideological universe, and then — through an iconography that adheres even in its most stark typifications to the canons of realist representation — to pass the whole thing off, despite its uncanny resemblance to the familiar world in which we live, as a wistful dream.

### IV

#### Breaking the circle

During the 1960's advertising was the most, perhaps the only, stable medium of mass ideological communication. Besides the downplaying of technological futurism and the increased use of sexual themes (the latter a cause of disturbance in itself), publicity's ideological feathers seemed hardly ruffled by the culture-storm<sup>10</sup> blowing, apparently, all around. Yet that storm did break out; and, as I have tried to indicate, the superstructural *decallage* within which it brewed and grew to hurricane force expressed a determinate historical moment of that same dialectic of culture and commodity which was also responsible for the spell-binding integration of the commercialized sign.

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Baudrillard, who ignored the mediations by which both these moments are connected to capitalism's commodification drive, was transfixed by the Manichaean absoluteness of their opposition. Had the mediations been attended to, the operations of artificial semiosis would doubtless have seemed less omnipotent and the mass outbreak of the Symbolic less conjuncturally mysterious than he made them out to be. Of course, it is hardly surprising that the Edenic epiphanies and street-fighting psycho-dramatics of 1968 nowhere ushered in the New Age: the requisite programme, organization and political forces were altogether lacking. But what that temporary breakdown of normal cultural controls did demonstrate, against all the end-of-ideology soothsaying of the previous decade, is that at the ideological level *par excellence* the development of post-industrial capitalism is as conflictual as it is consensualist; and, indeed, that under the right circumstances accumulated cultural tensions can even engender a global social crisis.

Theory and the evidence of history thus combine to provide grounds for hoping that the circle of the commodity-form's normative self-regulation can indeed be broken. To what extent such a fateful outcome can be deliberately strategized is, however, a different question. Because of the complexity of the process wherein cultural politics arise, the rectilinear relation its issues bear to matters of class hegemonic control, and the potentially self-undermining character of any transparently instrumental intervention into hot zones of consciousness, we may doubt the feasibility of anything so ambitious as a coordinated, multi-level, plan of cultural campaign. But in a more circumspect and *ad hoc* sense, Marx's directive to enter the "real battles" of the world in order to "show it what it is actually fighting about"<sup>19</sup> does retain here its moment of activist truth.

Of course, for us it is the commercial media more than organized religion which require demystification; and within the field of cultural politics considered in this paper demystification is hardly enough. The positive deployment of transcapist discourse and symbology is also necessary, indeed crucial, since unlike the recognition struggle of master and slave which underlies Marx's concept of class conflict the cultural dialectic of commodification has no truly inner principle of sublation. This, on the plane of trade-union consciousness, and leaving aside its Jacobin inspiration, is presumably what Lenin meant by saying that revolutionary consciousness had to come "from without." On the plane of normative consciousness and in a spirit of preparatory *attentisme* an even more idealist formula could easily be proposed: the stronger and richer the transcendental cultural resources lying to hand at the moment when some fresh round of superstructural troubles break out, the more likely it is that something truly human will strive to emerge — and the greater the chance, perhaps, that we finally will.

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### Notes

1. See V. Descombes, *Le Même et l'Autre* (Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1979), translated as *Modern French Philosophy* (Cam. U. Press, 1980).
2. In this essay I am focussing mainly on Baudrillard's early writings, particularly *Le Système des Objets* (Gallimard 1968); *La Société de Consommation* (Dengel 1970); *Pour une Critique de l'Économie du Signe* (Gallimard 1972); *Le Miroir de la Production* (Casterman 1973); and *L'Échange Symbolique et la Mort* (Gallimard 1976). For English translations of the latter, see *Mirror of Production* (Telos 1975); *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (Telos 1981), and the excerpts from *L'Échange Symbolique* in J. Fekete (ed.) *The Structural Metaphor* (Univ. of Min. Press, 1984).  
It would require a whole separate analysis to consider whether, in switching from a sociological to a metaphysical exploration of nihilism in the later texts like *Oublier Foucault*, *La Séduction* and *Stratégies Fatales*, Baudrillard's social ontology of sign and commodity has remained basically the same.
3. This is the basic motif of *L'Échange Symbolique et la Mort*.
4. Pessimism about proletarian consciousness and correlative elevation of (critical) theory's role within the social dialectic, while absolutized in this 1944 text, was an explicit theme of Frankfurt thinking from the early 30's. See M. Horkheimer, *Critical Theory* (Herder and Herder, 1972) pp. 211-216.
5. Baudrillard, *L'Échange Symbolique*, pp. 118-28.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
7. Baudrillard, *Pour une Critique de l'Économie Politique du Signe*, pp. 194-99.
8. The lament simulates what it projects, and for neo-Kantians (aren't we all?) there can be no escaping the fictitious character of the world. For Baudrillard's most explicit attempt to place himself outside this circle, see *L'Échange Symbolique*, pp. 7-10 and pp. 110-17.
9. The classic statement is to be found in E. Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (Free Press, 1964) Chap. 7.
10. For a brilliant traditionalist critique of the modern evolution of leisure see J. Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (Pantheon, 1952).
11. D. Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Basic Books, 1976).
12. Ecclesiastical ecumenicism, from the angle of religion's absorption into the culture industry, represents a movement towards cartelization between the largest enterprises. The perverse Paisley protest has its moment of truth here.-
13. B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.
14. For the notion of 'dominance' in this context see L. Althusser, 'Ideology and the State' in his *Lenin and Philosophy* (NLB, 1971). Althusser's formulation is much too rigid, however. It is crucial, especially, to disentangle dominance (of an apparatus) vis-à-vis individual formation from the question of inter-institutional influence and power within society as a whole.
15. For a good social psychological elaboration of this ultimately Sartrean distinction see A. Esterson, *The Leaves of Spring* (Tavistock, 1970).
16. Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, p. 169.

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17. Although they do not elaborate the point, a recent essay by G. Murdoch and P. Golding, 'Capitalism, Communication and Class Relations' states the main issue very well:  
". . . the determining context for production is always that of the market. In seeking to maximize this market, products must draw on the most widely legitimated central core values while rejecting the dissenting voice or the incompatible objection to a ruling myth. The need for easily understood, popular, formulated, undisturbing, assimilable fictional material is at once a commercial imperative and an aesthetic recipe". Curran, Gurevitch and Wollacott, (eds.) *Mass Communication and Society* (Edward Arnold, 1977) p. 40.
18. This evocative phrase was coined by H. L. Nieburg in his insightful anthropological study of 1960's counter-culture, *Culture Storm: Politics and the Ritual Order* (St. Martin's, N.Y., 1973).
19. Letter from Marx to Ruge 1843. See D. McLellan (ed.) *Karl Marx: Early Texts* (Blackwell, 1979).