BAUDRILLARD'S SEDUCTION

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> Peut-être fallait-il arrêter cette hémorragie de la valeur. Assez de radicalité terroriste, assez de simulacres—recrudescence de la morale, de la croyance, du sens. A bas les analyses crépusculaires!
>
> *Les stratégies fatales*

The following essay was written to come to terms with an abiding fascination with the work of Jean Baudrillard. To be fascinated implies, at least at a first moment, that one is attracted to something despite oneself, that one is drawn in wide-eyed with all belief suspended. Many times I have put his work down, sometimes violently, only to return charmed, nay seduced by the sublime irony of Baudrillard's sense of the absurd. Having recently translated one of his more pivotal works, *Seduction*, I find myself compelled to explain this fascination, with all its accompanying ambivalence, and explore its implications. Perhaps the reader shares this fascination, in which case s/he may recognize something of his or her own contrary reactions in my own, and will wish to share my line of questioning. Or perhaps the reader has never read Baudrillard. Perhaps the reader refuses to read his works because of their language, style, fashionability or politics. In this case the reader may consider this as an incitement and a guide to reading Baudrillard, for he cannot, I submit, be approached naively and read like any other author.

The book *Seduction* presents itself as an attack on the notion of truth, its pretensions and imperialism. A post-modern common-place, to be sure. But this is no mere defense of relativism, with its multiple or partial truths. Nor is it a search for some metaphysical fissure that would render the idea of Truth impossible, yet insurmountable; nor even the uncovering of some motive that would reveal the search for truth as our ultimate illusion. Here the strategy is different, and possibly more radical. Call it nihilism if one will, but only if this is not the last word.

Truth, Baudrillard begins, is associated with the realm of depths, and is to be attacked along with all the other figures of depth: that of the essence behind the appearance, the unconscious desire behind the symptom, the true nature behind the artifice, the sphere of production beneath the superstructure, the relations of force or power beneath the ideological or normative shell—in short, all the "realities" unearthed by science, interpretation, critique or some combination thereof. In opposition to truth with its underlying reality lies the realm of

appearances. And the book presents itself as a defense of appearances—including frankly illusory appearances—against depths. Seduction itself involves the play of appearances, their manipulation, their mastery.

Immediately one will ask, no doubt, how one can speak of appearances without seeking to account for them in terms of some underlying truth? And a somewhat different question, how can one write a piece of "sociology" that does not seek to penetrate the social surface in order to extract some deeper truth about society? (Note, we will be speaking here of something more than a work of sociology fiction which, if it follows the general canons of mimetic representation, demands the appearance of truth, that is, verisimilitude).

Consider a first response, one that directly addresses the first question while directly appealing to the problem of seduction. Seduction, if it serves to master reality, does so not by narrowing the gap between reality and appearances in order to eliminate the latter and act directly on the former. On the contrary seduction acts indirectly, widening the gap by manipulating the appearances in order to trick one's sense of "reality." Those who act in accord with the underlying reality signalled by the appearance, or who follow the "truth" of their desires, find themselves entrapped by their own search for a transparent truth. In this sense the indirect method, by virtue of its playfulness, artfulness and agnosticism, subverts the functioning of the solemn truth of depths. The manipulation of appearances has a backhanded superiority over the the direct manipulation of reality because capable of having the last laugh.

One may, of course, respond that the "real truth" behind the appearance of truth constructed by the seducer lies with the strategy consciously produced by the latter. But what if the seducer is seduced by his/her own game, and finds that s/he has little control over his/her strategy? What if both seducer and seduced are seduced by the realm of appearances such that it is the latter that determines "reality" (as opposed to reality determining appearances)? What if large areas of society operated according to a seemingly non-conscious, unmotivated logic of seduction? Must one think that appearances are merely an extension, alibi or front for something that lies beneath? Can they not convey imperatives or determinations (that is, a power, and a potentially superior power) of their own? Beyond the truth *behind* appearances can we not speak about a truth *of* appearances?

But then are we really talking about an attack on the notion of truth? Are we not simply supplementing one truth with another, that of depths with that of appearances? Is Baudrillard not simply telling us that we can no longer simply claim that society functions according to some underlying logic, whether functional or conflictual, teleological or aeteological, or that texts embody some underlying intention or structure... that we must also look at the play of surfaces, the strategies the latter embodies, the possibilities it affords. The science (or hermeneutics) of depths can no longer reign supreme. It will have to make room for a second branch of knowledge dedicated to analyzing the "truth" of appearances and (why not?) a third that examines the play between depths and appearances. One then imagines the first moving vertically in an attempt to decode the social text, the second moving horizontally to examine the latter's

recodings, while the third would move between the two, examining their conjunctions, intrusions, interferences and inversions—in short, their "communication." The pretensions of the first may be severely curtailed, but the final result will not be so radical. The content will have changed but the project, its finality relative to a notion of truth, will have been preserved intact.

Baudrillard, however, is not (or is not simply) seeking to establish a new, supplementary area of study, even one that throws a curve at all knowledge as heretofore constructed. By speaking of appearances in and for themselves, (that most visible of spheres which remains, nonetheless, outside the vision of the social sciences), he is not seeking to add a new field to the store of knowledge, one that, admittedly, is full of ironic inversions and subtle revenges. To claim the latter would be to miss the deep pessimism of his epistemology and, even more, the deeply pessimistic character of his analysis of present tendencies relative to epistemology. In effect, for Baudrillard history has epistemological effects: it is not just that science or knowledge have a history, but that the very terms science or knowledge suppose as ontological preconditions—here terms like appearances, depths, truth and reality—are also to be radically historicized. With the ultimate claim being that the tendencies of the present are such that these terms can only be sustained with increasing difficulty. More particularly, the problem, according to Baudrillard, is that the distinction between appearances and depths is collapsing, and that, as it were, from both sides.

Consider first the appearances collapsing into reality. Suppose the enlightenment dream is being realized and we are living in an increasingly transparent society, a society without secrets or areas of darkness, without veils, blinders or illusions, a society where what was hidden is becoming visible and all that is visible is, as a result, becoming substantial. It would be a society of appearances because without underlying realities. It would be a society where all appearances would be real, equally real and, accordingly, equally unreal. (One often encounters in Baudrillard social utopias—and theoretical utopias—shipwrecked by the logical extension of their premises to their ultimate realization).

Now consider the other side of the coin, reality collapsing into appearance. Suppose the appearances substitute themselves for the underlying reality and become that by which we gauge what is "truly real" in place of (or in the absence of) any real functioning referent. In this case one has moved beyond a world of verisimilitude, where appearances appear real, into a world of simulation, where appearances appear more real than reality—what Baudrillard calls the "hyper-real"—because "reality" as we experience it is modelled on appearances (rather than appearances being modelled on reality). Again one confronts a society of appearances (in the form of simulated models), where appearances are "real" and "reality" (as expressed in the hyper-real) appears as the most significant of "illusions."

In both cases, whether reality collapses into appearances or vice versa—and the two cases are indistinguishable in their consequences—the very meaning and value of truth begins to fade. And how could it not fade given the loss of the underlying reality of a referent with which to anchor appearances? One's very sense of reality teeters when confronted with an excess of unassimilated (and

unassimilable) information, or with a host of hyper-real images which pre-construct the "reality" of desire, not to mention the quasi-compulsory visibility of a confessional culture. History does not simply affect epistemology; in the living future of the present it is seen to subvert the very possibility of epistemology, particularly in its quotidien forms. And with truth losing its meaning and value, it only follows that meaning is losing its meaning and value its value. With all the notions that these terms nourished beginning to fade in tandem. The value and meaning of the social and the political, not to mention social or political action, of history and the event, of sex, war... with each book the list of "referents" destined to disappear grows longer. On the horizon of Baudrillard's radical historicism, the vanishing points are to be taken literally—even as these "referents" are sometimes denied their substance less in terms of a fade-out than by way of their parodic excess. As such, an analysis of the realm of appeareances provides, at best, an anti-climactic, funereal truth (as if the owl of Minerva were turning into a vulture, even as it was flying away). Again one wonders: if with the disappearance of any underlying reality, meaning and value are withering away along with truth, how then can one write a work of sociology? Indeed one wonders how one can write anything at all?

And yet, to state the obvious, the work has been written and it is, if not sociology, then social theory. In order to understand the apparent paradox of its writing, let us begin by saying that Baudrillard is not (or not primarily) concerned with writing a work of "truth." He is more interested in throwing down a challenge to those who are so concerned. To all those "social scientists" who believe themselves to be explaining something of society by reference to its underlying reality, Baudrillard is saying that they are not (because seduced by and entrapped in their own theoretical simulations) and that they cannot (because the underlying reality they are proposing to describe, for all intensive purposes, no longer exists). And that he himself, by not trying to write such a work, will write something that resonates our present predicament with much greater force. In short, he will beat them at their own game. Though by so doing he will have changed the rules, for writing social theory will now truly be a game. And consequently, we the readers will, without having entirely left the "real," familiar world, find ourselves entering a very different terrain, with different expectations and different stakes. This becomes immediately evident when one considers the absence of that tone of high seriousness that generally marks works of social theory. Baudrillard's writing is, by contrast, hilarious—and this despite its *fin de siècle* (or *fin de millénaire*?) melancholia.

Consider something of the nature of this "game." The first thing to note is that concepts take on a different character, with a new, strategic value. In most works, and independent of the theoretical modality, concepts are constructed as instruments of interpretation that enable one to penetrate below the surface obstacles constituted by appearances (be they composed of false objects or false concepts) to the reality below. By contrast, Baudrillard treats concepts as all surface; for he, as it were, brackets their referents—that is, the underlying reality to which refer—and thus their truth value. (It is as though one were being placed before an inverted version of the phenomenological inversion). In effect, just as

Baudrillard is claiming that society is becoming all surface, he tends to treat concepts as though they were all appearance, and thus had a reality of their own. One can, to be sure, perceive a structuralist influence here: the signs or concepts being constituted less in relation with their referents than with other signs or concepts. The bracketing, however, proceeds beyond the referent to the signifieds, the meanings themselves, thus freeing the concepts from too serious a concern with their finalities, whether descriptive, interpretative or explanatory. And once they have been delivered from the ballast of referent and function, Baudrillard is free to play with them, to call upon their symbolic resources (though not, as in Lacan, with reference to an unconscious), combine them in new ways, place them in new logics and, more generally, put them to flight. Does he believe in what he is saying? The implication here is that, with the truth value of the terms momentarily bracketed, the question is beside the point (at least at a first moment). Thus one should not be surprised to see him trying out, one after another, different, even contrary hypothesis, without any of them being either rejected or retained. (Think of the multiple us of the words "or else"...—as in the book's second page). Or consider more generally the conceptual escalation to theoretical extremes. For once they have lost anchor the concepts are able to circulate with breath-taking rapidity in a manner simultaneously declamatory and poetic. The contrast with more conventional forms of social analsysis could not be more blatant. Where most theorizing, with its unassuming prose, holds to a steady course in order to move ever closer towards its object and carress its details, here the looking glass has, as it were, been turned the wrong way round. One finds oneself pushed away from the objects under analysis, forced to observe them from an astonishing distance, and in rapid succession. The velocity of the text's movements is dizzying, and it appears a miracle if any underlying substance sticks.

Nonetheless, even when the concepts are in rapid motion, something of their reference and meaning must necessarily be retained (even if on occasion one finds oneself dragged willy-nilly by a runaway metaphor). After all, to bracket a concept's truth value is not to deny the latter, which returns, as it were, almost immediately. If the text is to make any sense at all, if it is to be more than just sound and fury, something must stick, if only by association. It is as though the process Baudrillard describes—the hemorrhaging of truth and meaning—is simultaneously a premise of his writing. But by the same token, this writing also supposes, if it is to retain even a shadow of sense, that the process is never complete, that "society" can never be completely bloodless—only anemic. It is not just that this societal anemia enables the concepts to lose much of their referential weight, or that the relation of societal anemia to conceptual lightness provides the work with much of its social resonance. It is because of this relation, presumably, that we are able to learn something about society from reading Baudrillard, but often, as it were, on the wing. Perhaps we should not speak here of "truth" but of "truth effects." For what we "learn" sometimes appears as a kind of serendipitous byproduct of the conceptual play, whereby suddenly we glimpse something in a completely untoward and unexpected manner. One finds oneself gasping: between two commas one could easily drive

an expository truck; single sentences could easily be turned into books. This is, no doubt, part of the work's fascination, its vertigo.

However, one cannot stop here. It is not just in terms of its conceptual play, but in certain of its larger traits that the work breaks (and breaks with) the "laws" of doing social science and takes on the character of a game (as the author himself describes it, most notably in the chapter in *Seduction* entitled "The Passion for Rules"). One might wish to see the apparent lack of concern with truth, or with the referentiality supposed by the notion of truth, as reflecting the book's game-like character (games do not have an external truth: their "truth" is entirely immanent, which is to say they know neither truth nor falsehood). Or one might see as indicative of its ludic nature the fact that the book avoids the single-minded character of a linear and cumulative progression, but instead seems to jump from topic to topic while simultaneously circling in on itself, with a prose that sometimes takes on a repetitive, almost ritualistic quality. But most of all, the game-like quality of the writing is to be seen in the relation it establishes with the reader—a relation that can best be described as a duel. Baudrillard is constantly throwing his readers' challenges—challenges to their credibility, challenges to their tolerance.

It must be clearly stated that there is something in his work to upset everyone. One finds for example a defense of astrology (and in another work, of the arms buildup). Even more typical is the brutal assault on feminism, psychoanlysis and Marxism (though in the latter case one is merely dealing with the after-shocks of *The Mirror of Production*), not to mention structuralist semiotics and the Deleuzian politics of desire (all the currents of the right-thinking left, all those who would be on the side of truth, justice, history and the Revolution—in short, all his potential readers). Baudrillard's attacks are often quite "deep," but they are never in depth; they are always rapid, almost scattershot, often bold, sometimes outrageous.

Consider some of the different, but interrelated strategies of these attacks. First, there is the rejection of the radicality of intellectual currents under attack. They are, it is claimed, secretly complicit with what they would criticize: they are part of the same imaginary, they hold to the same logics and reveal the same blind spots (Marxism shares with market ideology a naively utilitarian view of the object, feminism shares a phallocentric dismissal of appearances, etc). Second, there is the rejection of the ontological foundation on which the current seeks to ground itself and acquire its critical leverage: (use value is not a natural property of the object, but the other face of exchange value; feminism, at least in the version parlayed by Luce Irigaray, swims in a simulated biology, etc). Third, there is the denial of the very object of the school (there is no unconconscious; there is only one sex and it is masculine), or at least of its continued existence (there is no longer any desire, only sex, which itself is being neutralized by the violence of pornography), or perhaps only its continued relevence if it still exists (the sexual difference is becoming less significant socially because defined biologically; the social is brain-dead, but artificially maintained on a life support system to maintain the warmed-over corpse of a political project). Fourth, one must speak of the play of reversibility, whereby

upper and lower, dominant and dominated, manipulator and manipulated, knower and known are made to exchange places by way of all the subtly ironic strategies that play with appearances so as to ensure that things are not what they seem (the mute impermeability of the masses as a strategy of resistance to the despotism of enlightenment, frigidity as a subversion of male desire). And last but not least—for implicit in all of the above—there is the quick, continuous, theoretical outbidding, often followed by the mirror play of reverse hypothesis (e.g., there is no longer a working class, nor is there a revolutionary subject, nor any subject whatever, whether collective or individual... and if the subject is disappearing, the object must be too... but then maybe the object is seeking its revenge and claiming the position, autonomy and sovereignty of the subject, and this outside all reference to "alienation").

The rapidity of the analysis, the exaggerated character of the claims, the fast and loose experimentation with theoretical propositions, the apparent unconcern with logical or any other form of consistency, not to mention the content of what is being said—all this is shocking. A fact that is perhaps in itself shocking. After all, we have been told that in this age of post-modernism cultural modernism is passé, and precisely because it has lost its capacity to shock—in which case, social theory may well be the last refuge for cultural avant-gardes (which might explain the attraction of Baudrillard for artistically inclined circles). One certainly does sense in Baudrillard a pleasure of transgression, even as he tells us that such pleasures belong to an earlier period, when the law still held sway and deviance had not yet been banalized.

The point here is that Baudrillard is not to be taken literally (how can he be taken literally, when he tells us that nothing else can?). He has created an artificial, simulated space within which to play his hand (and games suppose the most artificial and simulated of spaces because they require no reference to a reality outside themselves). This is not a political space (which, without excluding a certain gamesmanship, must seek its foundations in notions of law, justice and, yes, truth, incompatible with a ludic universe). As such, it is somewhat beside the point to respond to it politically. Even less helpful would be to respond simply with outrage, and refuse to read any further. One cannot take up the challenge by quitting the game, while trying to change the rules would be equivalent to cheating.

Of course one might ask, why play at all? Presumably, because the game is not simply a joke. Because it is not without seriousness, because there are what I termed earlier "truth effects," because the text resonates beyond the printed page, because the attacks often hit their target, because the stakes are "real"—because, in short, it is more than a game. How then does one play? How does one respond to Baudrillard's challenge? Simply by purchasing and reading the book? But presumably, by purchasing the book, we are in a somewhat better position than those who dared the absurd by responding to the advertisement that asked one to send a dollar. And presumably, by reading the book, we are doing more than subjecting out intellectual convictions and good conscience to the thrills of an avant-garde rollercoaster ride? There must be some way to respond actively. It cannot simply be that Baudrillard is duelling with himself while we,

the readers, look on dumbfounded, absorbed in that newest of spectator sports, social theory.

Before, however, one can respond, even indirectly, to the problem of "reading Baudrillard," one must take another look at his analysis and its impact on what for him must be the problem of writing. Such a query must necessarily include another look at games as they are played both within and without the text.

Throughout his work, Baudrillard sets up a series of interconnected oppositions—truth vs. illusion, depth vs. appearance, production vs. seduction, the law vs. the game-rule, to name the most important. And in each case the second term, which has almost always been denied, derided or treated as frivolous, is recovered and, indeed, celebrated. Now Baudrillard is rescuing and reviving these terms not so much because he holds that the first term cannot exist without the second (at least some of the oppositions, as noted earlier, are collapsing: appearances are becoming reality and reality becoming all appearance); nor because he believes that their opposition holds the promise of some dialectical overcoming (the collapse of the opposition between appearance and reality is producing an ob-scene world—one might, perhaps, speak here of a regressive dialectics). The second term is not, or not necessarily, residual relative to the first, that is, constituted by its opposition to the dominant principle, and thus formed by and reflective of the latter. For Baudrillard the opposed terms each have their own "logic" and so form two different universes which, though they may "communicate," are fundamentally incommensurable. In other words, the world of truth, reality, production, law and desire is shadowed by a parallel world of appearance, illusion, seduction and games which can be exalted in a manner both forceful and ironic by virtue of its "logical" autonomy. But then the question becomes, if the second world has been for so long occluded by the first, particularly in the realm of social theorizing, how did Baudrillard discover it, let alone explore its continents? If it appears so residual within the present, how has he been able to endow it with its own principle?

At this point one is brought face to face with a terrible nostalgia. Over and over again one is referred to a notion of the primitive (which in previous works was conveniently condensed in the concept of "symbolic exchange"). The primitive here acquires its critical leverage not as a point of origin that would give some anthropological foundation to the human adventure, but as a point of maximum alterity which speaks of societies that operated according to altogether different principles, independent of all the master schemata of truth, representation, equivalence or desire so familiar to us. With the primitive Baudrillard would conjure up a time when rituals commanded social being, games were at the heart of social life, seduction was omnipresent (not just relative to the other sex, or other people, but to the gods), words could be delivered of their meaning in incantation, and death (and fate) could be willingly challenged and embraced. In other words, for our author the primitive represents that state where the "world" formed by the "second terms" functions with maximum autonomy and maximum effectiveness.

Once recovered in its full integrity, signs of the continued existence of the logic of this other world can be detected within the present, in however a

transfigured form. Indeed such is the occasion of many of Baudrillard's most brilliant *aperçus*. But note, the "logic of seduction" is recovered not just where one would most expect it—in courtship rituals, advertising, and entertainment—but also in those areas where one should be least expected to find it, that is, in those areas most invested by notions of truth, power and justice—the macro-realm of politics, as well as the micro-realms of inter-personal communication, sexuality and self (Baudrillard has not entirely forgotten Foucault). In these latter areas the logic of seduction often appears, as one might expect, to form a shadow world which, although dismissed and disparaged, haunts our conceptions of order and coherence, secretly subverting their claims. But just as often in Baudrillard's analysis, this logic appears to quit the shadows and move to center stage, leaving the other "real world" with only a secondary, cardboard existence. And this is no simple trick of perspective, for according to our author we are entering a brave, new and ludic world.

Consider the fate of politics. It is not simply that politics is no longer what it seems; it is that we no longer live in an era of politics. During the era of politics the fundamental terms of the political imaginary, the terms that give politics its value and meaning—terms like power, law, justice, equality, the public good or the people—still retained their force. Let it be noted that these are "transcendent" terms (and cannot be identified with the reality of society); they form a sort of mirror ideal above society by which the collective gathers itself together, attempts to establish its identity and orientations, determine its actions and give itself the means to carry out these actions. (And as such, these terms are constitutive of and participate in the distinctions between appearances and depths, illusions and realities, truths and falsehoods—and the concern with repression and liberation they entail—which Baudrillard would attack). If one then speaks of a democratic politics, one must add that these terms are not only without positive reality; they are without any definite content, the latter being subject to continuous debate. As a result they give rise to the expression of a division internal to society, whereby the principles supposedly constitutive of that society are subjected to constant questioning and conflict. Now suppose that another social "logic" emerges, in part as a response to, or better, as a way of avoiding any response to the underlying uncertainty of the era of democratic politics, and the public debate, social action and political conflict it calls forth. And that this new "logic" infiltrates the political scene, draining it of its substance and energy, leaving it only a shell of its former self, while imposing on the social order at large a very different mode of operationality, with very different motivations, concerns and stakes. This, of course, is Baudrillard's claim, with the further claim being that this "logic" is not without links to that "primitive" logic of seduction noted above, with the prominence it gave to games and the play of appearances.[1] If as was suggested, Baudrillard is seeking to recover a world long neglected, then "history," one might say, is on his side, and the anthropological nostalgia becomes prescient of a living future. But the repressed returns in a very different form, with a troubling, parodic character.

We have already noted that, according to Baudrillard, we live in a world of appearances, but these appearances are of a radically changed character. They

no longer sit astride some invisible and underlying reality; they are becoming reality for us—which is to say that our sense of reality is now modelled on appearances, that ours is a simulated reality made to appear real. In this sense appearances are losing their illusory, imaginary and even representative character; for instead of maintaining their distance from reality, they would overtake reality in the models of the hyper-real. Within this world of appearances, one can speak of seduction (in a world of appearances one cannot but speak of appearances) but it too will have a radically changed character. No more the games of passion with their unpredictable outcomes and high stakes. No more that hot seduction subversive of one's sense of reality. One must speak instead of a soft seduction, one that acts as a social lubricant to the consumer society, rationing off minimal gratifications in homeopathic doses. Such seduction does not involve the mastery of illusions (thus supposing the difference between appearance and reality); one is less entrapped by illusion than absorbed by the simulated models of a reality that would would model the apparent reality of our desire. In effect, the collapse of the distinction between appearance and reality is accompanied by the collapse of that between the pleasure and reality principles. Which in turn must be considered the beginning of the end of that perspectival space within which the self situates its relation to others and their difference, and by incorporating the perspective of others, situates itself and its limits. If one then pushes this hypothesis further, with its elimination of the mirror state (and thus of all relational alterity of self and other), one imagines a radically "narcissistic" or "digital" universe where communication becomes ubiquitous and instantaneous, but also empty and circular, an endless proliferation without external mediation. It is at this point that one begins to perceive the ultimate triumph of a ludic world. But the games played here are those described by game theory—the formalized expression of all possibilities under limited conditions—while the "play" is that of a cybernetic universe—the modulation of a network of multiple connections and disconnections—all in the name of a search for maximization, whether that of operational efficiency or sensual plasticity. Such a world can barely be called fun. Its games do not enchant; they leave the "player" absorbed, transfixed by a numb fascination or by what Baudrillard terms at one point "a psychedelic giddiness."

Earlier I suggested that Baudrillard would combat the truth of depths by speaking of the superficial reality of appearances. But what is the sense of this combat when truth no longer attaches itself to an underlying reality, when it is appearances that alone are true because the apparent heir to the sovereignty of the real? In the face of such a situation, one might switch strategies, and instead of counterposing superficial truths to the deeper realities (discovered by science, interpretation or critique), quit the realm of truth and reality altogether by entering what in principle is the "un-real" and "un-true" realm of games. But what is the sense of such a feint when the blurring of appearance and truth has produced a ludic reality, and one in which games have lost their defiant and subversive character? A situation all the more problematic when one is not simply writing about games; what one is writing is itself a game. When, in other words, the way the book is written (and the way it is to be read) is made to reflect

and respond to the content of what is written. But then how can one write a seductive work that would ensnare and entrance its readers when the character of seduction has become so degraded? How can one challenge one's readers when the reading public, its tastes shaped by the televisual media, has become impervious to reflection? How can one even communicate with this public when the language it understands systematically denies all alterity? Or put in another way, what sort of analytic strategy can one devise to counter the rose-coloured nightmare one is attempting to deconstruct? What sort of theoretical response might retain its subversive charge in the face of a world drained of substance, meaning, value and difference?

In this regard there are, I believe, two very different, even contrary responses in Baudrillard's work. The first moves as far outside the cold seduction of the digital universe as possible, towards that point of maximal alterity, the seduction of a primitive world... and that without moral tergiversation. How else is one to interpret the theoretical embrace of the terms of ritual and sacrifice, and the cruel, fatalistic world it implies? And what about the discussion, most notably towards the end of *Fatal Strategies*, of a universe determined not by universal laws of cause and effect, or those of chance, nor some combination thereof, but by the always particular, charmed and for us, senseless "logic" implied by predestination? As if the world of games would still, by virtue of some final irony or desperate hope, secretly reign supreme. Are we to see this as the hidden determination beneath a transparent world? Or as the dialectical reversal at the end of the end of history? One has the impression that Baudrillard is here creating a myth in the full sense of the word, and that this myth is a gamble in the Pascalian sense—the unreasonable but necessary belief in an invisible and sacred principle that holds the fate of each and all of us in the balance.

The other response moves in the opposite direction, towards that which it describes, appropriating its materials and extending its logic in the hope of imploding it from within. Baudrillard's analysis is extreme and describes a world that is "going to extremes". Throughout he details a sort of logical flight forward whereby, in the absence of the anchorage of referents, finalities, limits, laws or rules, some principle is "doubled," producing an unreal and disconcerting excess. Thus reality is made more real than real in the simulations of hyper-reality, speed becomes faster than fast as it reaches the point of instantaneity, obesity takes one beyond fatness (to take an example from *Fatal Strategies*), and pornography renders sex more than visible while neutralizing it by its excess. Such an "escalation to extremes" involves both a logic of proliferation—before all the exorbitant "images" of reality, sex, speed or flatulence, one can only reply that it is "too much"—and a logic of disappearance—the disappearance of (the meaning and value of) reality, sex, the body, movement and distance. In effect, within the space of his text, Baudrillard is creating a simulation model of a trajectory identified with present-day tendencies, speeding it up, which he can then watch with what must be a mixture of pleasure and horror as it all collapses in on itself. And in the process he has managed to write something that is truer than true, something that he might call an "ecstatic" truth (ecstasy being defined at one point in *Stratégies fatales* as "the vertiginous super-multiplication of

formal properties"). Perhaps this is where Baudrillard is upping the ante and throwing down his ultimate challenge, daring the logic to go beyond the point where it can be meaningfully sustained and becomes absurder than absurd. Perhaps this is how, in his imagination, he would seduce and destroy the unreal reality he feels so estranged from, by calling on its resources to trap it within its own movement. Perhaps by its very fatalism such a strategy is (primitively) seductive.

In many ways this is the more satisfying response, and yet does it not threaten to become one with what it describes—a simulacrum of the dystopia of the living future? Does it not, by virtue of its conceptual self-referentiality begin to turn in on itself to the point where it turns to an incantatory prose and begins to lose all meaning? With its theoretical escalation to extremes and its hypothetical exhaustion of all alternatives in the mirror-play of reversibility, does it not deny itself all stakes in the forecast of an unalterable doomsday scenario? And is not the latter not just another one of those banal apocalypses, one of those catastrophes without consequences, which we are, as Baudrillard himself recognizes, so eager to consume in this pre-millenial era? After all the rapid-fire analytic connections and disconnections that play so fast and loose with meaning and value, doesn't the reader emerge from the book in a giddy theoretical daze? And what is the nature of the fascination? How many of those who are attracted to the work are left literally speechless, in a state of "somnambular euphoria"?

When beginning to write this essay, I told myself that I would be venting my own ambivalence relative to Baudrillard's work. But now that I am nearing the end I am convinced that the ambivalence is immanent to the work itself. Though written in extremes, it perhaps allows of only equivocal responses. If its claims were to be taken too seriously, or too literally, by either author or reader, then the former should have found it impossible to write the book, and the latter to read it. On the other hand, if the claims could simply be denied, the book would be less than uninteresting. Yet it remains fascinating: a work of sociology that violates all the canons of social science, a work of ethics that would dispense with morality, a radical work that would be without hopes. A work that would reject the very idea(l) of truth, but supposes a residual truth for its impact. And that would quit reality to enter the "unreal" space of games, but as a game would reflect the space that it has quit. It is a work that would shock its readers though they be rendered insensible by the saturation of obscene images; that would challenge its readers though they be inoculated to all but the most formal (and least antagonistic) of dualisms; and would communicate even as communication is increasingly being reduced to what one eighteenth century utopian termed the "language of the bees." A work that resonates with the irreality of the real, that fantasizes a world without fantasy, and would play in ways that it declares obsolete. A work that bemoans a world of simulation, and would then produce a radical simulation of theory. A work whose major concepts are, like so many tops, sent spinning at such a speed that they would disappear from human history. Simultaneously agonistics and agnostics, augur and agony, it is a marvelously impossible book. Something one can neither accept nor reject. A

work that both attracts and repels, absorbs and torments. In a word, the perfect postmodern fetish.

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Notes

1. I said earlier that one could not respond to Baudrillard's texts politically. The reasons are not simply "epistemological" (he is not writing about the underlying reality of society, nor is he writing a work of politics—his writing is a game) but also "historical" (the political scene no longer *has* any meaning in the present and, therefore, nothing can be expected of it). To be sure, this continuous tacking between "epistemology" and "history" can produce for the would-be critic a very slippery, even duplicitous text.