BAUDRILLARD, CRITICAL THEORY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

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Introduction

This essay presents a condensed version of an argument about the sign, the object and the symbol.[1] Its purpose, then, is to suggest how psychoanalytic thought, particularly "object-relations theory", may provide a way out of the stalemate in critical theory.[2]

The theory of reification, although essential to critical theory, is itself based on intellectualized reifications of what it means to be a "subject" and not an object.[3] The traditional theory of reification is described in the light of Baudrillard's work and then rejected in favour of another which views reification as an obsessional project of closing down or emptying out "potential space".

The phrase "potential space" was coined by D.W. Winnicott to refer to a dimension of "transitional" phenomena intermediate to subjectivity and objectivity. My most basic theoretical assumption is that the "space" of the "transitional object" is a place where people actually live, where they are creative, where they interact in depth, and where things are invested with meaning.

I

The best general approach to Baudrillard is through the philosophical tension in his work between structuralist social theory (Lévi-Strauss, Barthes) and critical theory (Lukacs, Marcuse). These are the two modern traditions, dragging their French and German antecedents with them, which are most obviously at work in Baudrillard's early texts. It would be a mistake, however, to think that he ever synthesized them, although it is true that the interplay of structuralism and cultural Marxism determined, to some extent, Baudrillard's own distinctive way of choosing a post-structuralist position. The net theoretical effect is more like the introduction of two corrosives which, having devoured each other, leave nothing behind but a luminous theoretical vacuum. Baudrillard's writing has, since *L'Échange symbolique et la mort*,[4] increasingly approximated a blank surface reflecting only the awful terror of what it had once tried to name.

What is interesting about critical theory and structuralism together (at least, in the medium of Baudrillard) is the dilation of their theories of the *object*. A reading of Baudrillard makes one want to return to these traditions simply to listen to the way objects are talked about. Baudrillard caught this element in their discourse early on,[5] and developed it rapidly. Armed with just the two

theoretical languages, the neo-Marxian and the structuralist, he abandoned himself to the world of things.

Jean Baudrillard has a knack for a kind of McLuhanesque "in depth participation," and he turns the two theoretical languages into quite precise tools of description which evoke the object world with amazing poetical force and tension. Although in the end he virtually destroys both structuralism and critical theory (something Baudrillard does to almost everything he touches), he has managed to extract and deliver a lot of what is interesting in the two traditions before bringing them into mutual disrepute. Most of this material has to do with *objects*.

Before Baudrillard critical theory had a great deal to say explicity about objects, which is odd because critical theory has always claimed to be more concerned with the fate of subjects. It can be argued, however, that critical theory has very little of value to say about subjects. According to critical theorists, subjects are beings that make things; they experience a world (usually one they have made themselves without knowing it); they transfer their feelings onto the world, and they internalize authority. In other words, subjects are beings who (according to critical theory) produce, project and introject.

Structuralists aren't much better on this score, although on the surface they may appear to be more sophisticated. Usually, a structuralist begins by arguing that the subject is not an ontological category. There is some value in this argument. But then the structuralists go on to imply that subjects are not epistemological categories either. They do this by arguing that the subject is "decentered". This is true, but not very interesting by itself, and not very different from what critical theory has already said. After all, what does decentering mean, if not producing, projecting and introjecting? The only difference is that critical theory disapproves of this sort of heteronomy, and wants to get rid of it, whereas structuralism thinks it is a good thing, and wants to extend it. Both traditions agree that the subject's experience is false, but not on the reasons why. There is nothing new in these arguments, taken by themselves, but something quite interesting happens when Baudrillard plays them off, one against the other.

Baudrillard is usually thought of as a structuralist or a post-structuralist thinker rather than as a critical theorist in the tradition of the Lukacs/Frankfurt School. But in fact, he remains deeply involved in the latter tradition. It is true that he has made his name as a debunker of Teutonic theory and is notable for being openly anti-dialectical. But Baudrillard is not just contra Marx: he is also contra Foucault, contra Saussure, contra Levi-Strauss, contra Freud, contra Deleuze, etc. In fact, Baudrillard is against any thinker whose ideas he takes seriously. To use a word of Marx's, he is a "counterdependent" thinker. His arguments nearly always depend on the credibility of the categories of the other thinkers he defines himself against. This feature of Baudrillard's discourse is quite typical of critical theory, and secretly dialectical. Perhaps he is saying that if dialectics are not, in his view, an intrinsic property of the world, they are certainly a feature of discourse about subjects and objects. At any rate, when

Baudrillard launches his critique of critique in *The Mirror of Production*, his tone is not so much that of a dyed-in-the-wool structuralist as that of a critical theorist denouncing himself.

There is another, more fundamental reason why Baudrillard should be considered a critical theorist. In fifteen years, since his first sociological publications, which were a review of McLuhan's *Understanding Media*[6] and his own *Le système des objets*, Baudrillard has not written a single thing which was not an attempt to elaborate a theory of reification à la Lukács, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse — with a strong dose of Benjamin. The theory of reification is of course a story about a struggle between subjects and objects in which objects appear, if only temporarily, to have gained the upper hand. Broadly, a theory of reification is not only a theory of misplaced concreteness or of false objectivity (which implies a false subjectivity, of course); it goes further and claims that when objects are misunderstood in this way, they return to haunt the subject and spoil his whole experience. The theory of reification which Baudrillard works with has definite roots which go all the way back to Georg Lukacs and Karl Marx. Like Lukacs' important work, all of Baudrillard's work is a meditation on Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. This makes Baudrillard a critical theorist. There is nothing more essential to cultural Marxism than the theory of reification, which at root is always based on the idea that the structure of the commodity is in some way the abstract essence of capitalist life. If in his later work Baudrillard seems to part more and more with the rationality of critical theory and its interest in the emancipation of subjects, I think it is because his theory has developed gradually into something quite different from the traditional critical theory of reification: it has turned into what Baudrillard now calls "simulation". But this is still a theory of reification.

In order to explain this development, it is useful to return to Baudrillard's very clear analysis in *Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*.[7] The argument is quite complex, and it depends first of all on a reading of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism.

Marx argued that objects (i.e., produced goods, or use values) are turned into commodities when they acquire through a complicated socio-historical development the additional characteristic of exchange value. Apart from the details which make this development specifically capitalist, one can say that, in Marx, to the extent that objects seem to become pure exchange values, they enter into a system, the commodity system, which appears to act independently of their producers and consumers. The origin of objects in labour and their purpose in satisfying needs tend to be obscured from public view. This is the argument that Lukacs elaborated into the theory of reification.[8] It claims that this false and borrowed power of objects can operate on three and perhaps even four levels: 1) the socio-economic; 2) the epistemological; 3) the practical; and 4) sometimes also the erotic.

Through the lens of critical theory, Marx can be read as having said or nearly having said: 1) that social beings are deprived of their social ground by a process of *extraction*, which robs them of economic power; 2) that they are thereby also

deprived of their (social) knowledge by a process of *abstraction* which is induced by the systematic and objectivistic quality of exchange value; 3) having been economically reduced and cognitively seduced, people begin to forget how to respond: they can no longer act or reciprocate. They can only react to what is "given", as if what is given were an intractable "second nature".[9] And finally, 4) we might add, following the arguments of many critical theorists, that there is a fourth dimension to the effects of reification — the one that I have described as erotic. Social beings not only tend to lose their power to be, to perceive and to act: reification also neutralizes or restricts or damages their ability to fantasize, which lies at the very root of everybody's ability to think.

Of course, this last dimension owes something to Freud. All told, reification amounts to a very serious charge to make against anybody, let alone a whole society. It means that commodity fetishism — or if you like, falsely perceived objects — are such a powerful force that they penetrate deeply enough into the lives of individual subjects to control their inner worlds. It sound like a paranoid fantasy, like something Judge Schreber might have thought up.

Now there are two things about this theory of reification that are important to note. The first is that it is hard to imagine how critical theory could ever do without it, for the notion that the commodity form somehow congeals all the bad contingencies of an historical era is fundamental. How can critical theory continue to be critical in the absence of some such hypothesis? The second is that it is hard to imagine how the theory of reification could possibly be true.

Now, these questions have been raised in a way that is obviously slanted for the purpose of discussion Baudrillard's work. Some detail may be distorted, but the underlying issues are fundamental, and Baudrillard has responded to them in a highly original way which is still coherent with the critical tradition. Equipped with the theoretical language of structuralism and some insights from French writers such as Bataille and Foucault, Baudrillard waded into some very deep water indeed in the mid 1970's, and he took critical theory along with him.[10] There was something quite innocent about this at the beginning. In his 1967 review of McLuhan, he said that when you generalize the slogan "the medium is the message" you have the "very formula of alienation in a technical society". He was interested in looking at the commodity as a medium of social values and as a model of public discourse. The idea was very simple.

All that Baudrillard did, in fact, was to point out that the object becomes a commodity not only by virtue of being an exchange value, to be measured and exchanged against other exchange values; the object is also and especially a commodity *because it is a sign*.[11] (This seems so obvious to many of us now that perhaps it should be disputed in order to make the whole discussion more interesting.) It means of course that the commodity is a signifier and a signified, with all the features of abstraction, reduction, equivalence, discreteness and interchangeability implied in the Saussurean theory of the sign. A commodity is not just an exchange value which obscures its origin in labour as an object of, by and for utility; it is an object which has been inserted as an arbitrary term into a purely self-referential system of signifiers which decides the object's meaning

before anyone can possess it or consume it or give it away. The commodity is an object in a system of objects; it is consumed as a sign of that system.

Baudrillard calls this phenomenon the "sign-object". He replaces Marx's notion of the commodity form (which is a social form tending to obscure the object's content) with the idea of an "object-form". This object form is also a social form, like Marx's commodity, but it has much deeper implications. What it "veils in mystery" is not the object's real value: *its* origin in labour and its finality in the moment of consumption — i.e., its use value. What the object form conceals is the object's own "nullity". The commodity is a *res nulla*: a *symbolic* absence. Or to put it another way, the object form (the commodity as sign) exhausts and evacuates the social space it occupies. It hides the fact that its meaning does not exist in a relationship between people (what Baudrillard would call Symbolic Exchange), but in the inner relations of signs and commodities among themselves.[12]

As a structural model of reification, this "object-form" is a much more radical hypothesis. It cuts deeper and gets to the 'real' sub-stratum of the social object: its use value. With the logic of signification as his tool, Baudrillard pries apart the bundle of relations which constitute the commodity, only to discover that use value does not designate the otherness of political economy at all, but its ideological groundwork. For included in the object form is precisely the assumed functionality and utility of commodities that Marx had wanted to restore to society by liberating the means of production and abolishing exchange value. According to Baudrillard, use value is simply a product of the alienated system of exchange itself. It is not the meaning of the object, anymore than the signified is the meaning of the sign; it is the effect of the play of signifiers. To use a phrase of Adorno, use value is not the "non-identical side" of the object; it is not a moment of particularity or of quality, such as might be found outside the form in the 'real' act of "consumption". Perhaps this explains the somewhat strained atmosphere of the Frankfurt School's attempts to explain the fetishization of culture in terms of exchange value.[13] For use value turns out to be an alibi for the exchange value system, rather than its hidden or repressed truth. It does not escape the logic of reduction, equivalence and fungibility imposed by political economy. On the contrary, it *is* political economy — its ideal and ideological referent.[14]

The consequence of this argument, of course, is gradually to shift the stance of traditional critical theory away from anti-objectivism to an intensified critique of naturalism. Eventually Baudrillard will carry this forward from the naturalism of Political Economy and Marx's critique of it to the functionalism of the Bauhaus, to the naturalism of the unconscious in various schools of thought, from Surrealism on to Deleuze, and finally to the "hyper-reality" (as Baudrillard calls it) of constituted self-regulating systems, which range from the naturalization of coded difference in molecular biology (DNA) to the cybernetic design of social life itself.[15]

But the critique of the political economy of the sign remains the centrepiece of Baudrillard's work. One cannot read his earlier books on objects and

consumption without anticipating this re-evaluation of all socio-economic values. The new model of reification that emerges transforms the whole problematic of the commodity, which has been the core of critical theory and cultural Marxism since Lukács. And all of Baudrillard's subsequent work flows from this conceptual realignment. The key to it, of course, was to read semiology right into the process of political economy, to find the logic of signification in the very structure of the commodity. What is important to grasp, however, is that this is not just another synthesis. There have been plenty of attempts to combine Marx and Freud. Baudrillard's inspiration was different. He wanted to use structuralist theory as the mimetic description language of reification as such. In Baudrillard, the Saussurean model of language really *becomes* the *action* language of the commodity; and the apparent self-sufficiency of the structuralist model of the sign delineates for him the form of reification as a social phenomenon. An interesting consequence of this in the later books, beginning with *L'Échange symbolique et la mort*, is that the equation *commodity = sign = reification* evolves with the internal transformations of the theory of the sign. As semiology begins to devour its own tail in post-structuralist discourse and in the work of Derrida in particular, the theoretical description language of structuralist discourse is no longer projected into the commodity, but hypothetically reembodied as the pure medium of reification, so that the opaque involutions of theoretical language come to serve as the perfectly transparent and unwitting surface of social reality.[16] Baudrillard calls this involution, "simulation", which is nothing other than reification as total semiosis, which now includes the body — or corpse — of social theory itself.

II

If the cutting edge of this conceptual reconfiguration is Baudrillard's attempt to introduce the question of meaning to Marxian discourse, this does not mean that he is able to tell us so much about the nature of social life today that we might not already have guessed. For this cutting edge is turned almost completely inwards, toward critical theory. Looking through the closing pages of *Le système des objets* or *La société de consommation*, the early works, we already find a host of disclaimers which testify, sometimes in a brilliant way, to the profound moment of self-doubt in the act of critique. What is relatively new in Baudrillard is the recognition that this moment of doubt redeems the recalcitrant object, and that there is no salvation without the object. The analysis of consumption *begs* the question of interpretation; it forces critical theory up against the consequences: it's interpretation or die. Échange symbolique or la Mort.

The fact that critical theory has systematically avoided this question is nowhere more obvious than in the traditional theory of reification, or more precisely, in the doctrine of commodity fetishism, which underlies all of critical theory's and cultural Marxism's vision of the modern age. Marx was never interested in the interpretation of commodities. He was concerned with their

"historical character", but not with their "meaning", which he dismissed as an illusion in the early chapters of *Capital*.[17] We can hardly blame Marx for not being attracted to the problem, but it is difficult to forgive the Frankfurt School, which professed to be concerned with culture. For what they fail to achieve, on the whole, is any charitable understanding of the role of things in the lives of people. Instead, the standard discourse of critical theory is laced with old Christian sentiments about people destroying their souls by worshipping powers they do not understand because they have projected them onto material objects. This is another way of saying that people are worshipping a false god, a graven image. Adorno was something of an exception to this at the theoritical level, but he was just as intolerant in practice. He described jazz enthusiasts as "temple slaves" prostrating themselves "before the theological caprices of commodities". He described people going to a Toscanini concert as worshipping the money they had spent on the ticket. This is the theory of commodity fetishism. It is part of a kind of religious or moral controversy, a sort of monotheistic attack on animism.

When critical theory is at its worst, what it wants, what it strives for, is a world without objects. The projected ideal is a kingdom of ends, the end of mediation. There is nothing outside absolute spirit anyway. It does not interpret; it decrees. The traditional theory of reification implies that so long as the totality remains inaccessible in its totality to the subject, the subject has been deprived of its essence. It is a vision of social reality which tends to equate emancipation with omnipotence.

Interpretation is impossible for critical theory during these bad theoretical moments because it does not approve of people endowing objects with magical properties, or projecting human qualities onto the world of things. Instead, they are expected to exercise magical control over objects. This is written directly into the theory of commodity fetishism. Objects can only have use value; everything else is mystification. As soon as people attach meaning to things, they plummet into false consciousness. The end of reification would amount to rational knowledge of the totality. People would have totally transparent relations with each other, either because there would be no objects to get in the way, or because objects would only exist insofar as they were rationally distributed according to need (presumably from a centre), or because they are only objects of disinterested aesthetic reflection, a type of relationship to an object which presumably does no harm to the spirit. This is why Marx must have preferred capitalism to feudalism: it was more rational, it made the real social relations clearer, there was less meaning to cloud the vision.[19] On this view, commodity fetishism is simply a residue of the old barbaric consciousness. The commodity ellicits a sort of social projection which disguises the real relations underpinning it. The object hides social reality. It must be eliminated.

Baudrillard's critique of the sign tries to cut through all this metaphysics. Reification ceases to be a mystical veil, a trick of consciousness, an alienation of the subject's power, the robbery of an essence, or a primitive projection based on ignorance. Instead it is a positive presence in its own right. It is physical and

it is organized in a describable way. It doesn't hide social relations; if anything, it is a tendency to prevent them from occuring. The self-sufficient object demands a self-sufficient subject. This autonomization and social isolation is achieved through what Baudrillard calls the "semiological reduction", which erodes the possibility of symbolic exchange. Where the commodity is, there the subject shall not be. But this is not the same as Marxian fetishism. It is the opposite, for the problem with the commodity as a systemic object is not, according to Baudrillard, that people attach emotional importance to it, but precisely that they cannot, because the commodity is already a sign. The logic of signification is no longer something to be ignored because it is a superstructural aspect of things which conceals a more profound economic logic, as critical theory once believed; the logic of signification lies, as Baudrillard writes, at the "very heart of the commodity". And because the sign-object is systemic, it comes with its play of meanings already coded. So the problem of reification, at least at the cultural level, is not that people have projected their powers onto things, but rather that objects have become increasingly closed off from human interaction in their systematic self-referential play. People probably have an incorrigible tendency to "fetishize" objects anyway; but the logic of signification blocks even this symbolic relation, and invites people to fetishize *systems* of relationship which are abstract and without much personal significance. This, I believe, is what Baudrillard means by the paradox that consumption has turned into a "system of interpretation" without meaning.[20] There is no meaning because there is no symbolic exchange. The symbolic is always about the potentiality of a relationship. The semiurgy of social objects reduces the availability of things for mediating social relations (symbolic exchange) and assigns them to mediating systems of signs instead. If commodity fetishism exists, it is because in our culture the object has become too rational: commodities come pre-fetishized.

III

Traditional critical theory has tended to parody the pattern of reification that Baudrillard describes to the extent that it holds out the vague promise of returning to a world of simple objects administered by simple subjects. But there can be no such world. In the sphere of culture, objects are never objective — but then they are usually not subjective either: they are neither neutral or natural facts nor hallucinations. This is even true for the real fetishist. For the interesting thing about a fetish, presumably, is that it is never clear what it is — whether it is really an object or whether it is part of the self. A fetish is probably undecidable, and for this reason, it can be thought of as existing in a free space between the subject and the object. But for the fetishist, this space is charged with an extraordinary amount of tension. The fetishist cannot tolerate his object's ambiguity, and wants to resolve it. What might have been a symbol, the symbol of a connection, has turned into a curse of sorts. The fetishist is like a lover who doesn't have a lover and therefore, in a sense, cannot have an object either. He cannot share his failed desire to merge with his lover with his lover's

failed desire to merge with him. He is alone with a thing that is not a thing — neither an other nor himself. He cannot wholly possess it because it is not self and he cannot abandon it because it is not other. The space between the subject and object where the fetish object oscillates so painfully is simply too dangerous. he wants somehow to close this space, but he cannot, because neither subjectivity nor reification are ever complete except in the moment of suicide.

The new model of reification changes our view of the subject. The subject is no longer a theory-praxis construct whose perception is clouded by the trickery of things. The subject is now an ambivalent psychological being whose space for living is gradually being closed off. Another way of saying this is that the subject cannot be, and has not been, strictly demarcated from the object — découpé. The realm of freedom cannot be abstracted from and separated from the realm of necessity, except as a sign — but this sign happens to be the ultimate illusory referent of the industrialized world, capitalist and communist. On this question, the only difference between the great blocks of political economy lies in their theories of distribution: the bureaucratic version is quite a bit more obsessive about controlling objects in the name of freedom.

The subject and the object cannot finally be distinguished. They overflow into the ambiguous space that exists between them, where people actually live, and things have meaning. This is where culture takes place. It cannot be wished away. It cannot be completely destroyed in a whole society, even by reification. It can only be more or less restricted, attenuated, under threat. We have lived in this ambiguous space ever since we were children, and we will never succeed in completely sorting it out into the categories of what is properly subject and what is object, or of what we actually made or thought up and what we simply found by luck or accident. Critical theory demands of us an impossible and debilitating maturity. We rationalize the ambiguous space as much as we can and as much as we have to, but we never do away with it because then we would not be able to live, we would have no where to play. This is what Baudrillard originally meant by symbolic exchange, and what he meant when he argued that the logic of the sign eradicates the social symbolic. (I cannot find any other meaning for it.) So reification ceases to be anything like the object's stolen powers returning to haunt the subject, and becomes more like the relative closure of a psychosocial space where, to borrow another phrase of Adorno, we might live in "harmony with the object", and with our own ambivalence.

The psychoanalyst Winnicott called this intermediate area "potential space" — it is where the transitional object exists for the child, between the more or less "me" and the more or less "not me". The transitional object is not an elimination of difference. It just leaves the paradox unresolved.[21] "This potential space is at the interplay between there being nothing but me and there being objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control".[22] The child is not challenged as to the logic of the situation. It is not expected to decide whether it really conceived this thing, or whether it just found a trivial piece of the objective world that it suspects it cannot control. The child is allowed to have its intense symbolic

experience. Nobody tries to define the object. Nobody tells the child, "that's just your imagination", or "that's just a bit of dirty old stuffed cloth". The child is allowed to play.

The tragedy of critical theory is that it has never been able to theorize this potential, transitional, symbolic space, although it has always been concerned with it. Critical theory expects so much from the subject that it can only explain away the damage by attributing fantastic, demonic power to the object. It leaves nothing human in between. There is no possible resolution but the destruction of one or the other: the death of the subject or the nihilating absorption of the object.[23] It is ironic that it was the greatest of critical theorists, Theodor Adorno, who presented these abstract alternatives to us most forcefully; and yet it was also he who grasped the life-saving compromise in the "nonidentical side of the object". The nonidentical side of the object, or symbolic exchange or the potential space of the transitional object are all names for a possibility which must be kept open, and opened further if reification is to be defeated.

Let me suggest, briefly, an extension of this thesis. The term potential space implies that there is a dynamic gap between the two relative poles that Winnicott — but also Habermas — call the subjective world and shared objective reality — or, in Habermas' terms, the "inner, private world" and the "outer, public world". My additional reflection is that this intermediate dimension, the world which grows out of the transitional object, has to be enriched and expanded *before* any idea of a publicly shared objective world such as Habermas envisions can be constituted in a genuine and healthy way. This is a crucial issue for cultural politics because there can be no "ideal (public) speech situation" without a foundation that openly and honestly embodies the pre-logical, symbolic root of action, relationship and meaning. Reification is ultimately nothing more than a betrayal or denial of this social symbolic root — which is why structuralist formalism makes such a good model of reified culture.[24]

The main battle among critical theories and cultural Marxisms today seems to be over the definition of this potential space. French theory has occupied it and called valuable attention to it. My criticism of the New French Thought is simply that in having called attention to intermediate areas of social experience, it has had a tendency to autonomize them as unbounded media (without subject and object), as pure media where signs literally devour their own meaning. So what I have been calling transitional space and what Baudrillard used to call symbolic exchange, Foucault now calls power, Deleuze and Lacan call desire, Derrida calls text and Baudrillard calls simulacrum. There is little effort in these trajectories to recover the constructive potential of the pre-logical symbolic dimension of experience. There is alternatively a tendency to stress the equivalence of three all-embracing terms: power = totality = irrationality, full stop. Foucault and Baudrillard and Derrida ultimately fail to solve the problems of critique because they reproduce, in their autonomous theoretical models of "power" and "text" what Baudrillard had originally described as the "very formula of alienation in a technical society" — The Medium is the Message. Instead of articulating an alternative, they reembody the old Hegelian theory of reification they attack.

The problem with Baudrillard's later work — the books that follow the *Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* and *The Mirror of Production* — is that what began as a critique of naturalistic categories has grown steadily into an obsession, a kind of desire to expunge nature itself, or more precisely, to convert it into an enormous and meaningless cycle of collapsing culture. Baudrillard's simulation is just another word for reification; it is a type of reification bearing no reference to any subject or object, without any counterpraxis. The consequence is that theory — even critical theory — is always faltering behind: it can only mirror what passes it by, with the same aimlessness of simulation itself. Simulation means the death of play in the total omnipresence of play. Baudrillard has autonomized the intermediate area and gotten lost in it, forgetting the virtual difference between the me and the not me which structures human play. He has turned culture inside out and made it a natural process. Play has become simply the function of the universe. And so you have the French Ideology, and Jacques Derrida. Against this catastrophe, Baudrillard has only one strategy left: symbolic exchange, which finding that it can no longer define itself in opposition to the sign, abandons exchange for absolute irreversible reversibility in death; in other words, nihilism.

Baudrillard's argument that reification is not false consciousness but the systematic closure of autotelic signifying systems probably leads fairly inevitably to this nihilism. But it is still an interesting argument because it forces critical theory to begin theorizing the area of transitional phenomena. Whether it is the commodity alone which produces the social effect of reified constriction or whether the commodity has only been the most convenient theme for a critical hermeneutic is another question. There is no inherent reason why the problem of reification should be posed exclusively in terms of consumption. The point of Baudrillard's argument is that we feel not so much mystified by the commodity as excluded by it. We feel excluded from the sign object in much the same way that we feel excluded from (and even hostile toward) a closed group with its exclusively internal system of reference. We tend to get lost in such systems, however, because we feel we have no choice: we have to have objects, partly because we have to have meaning, and sometimes we will take whatever we can get, even though nowadays we often don't expect it to be very significant.

IV

The intention of this paper can be summarized in a slightly different set of terms.

Critical theory has tended to skirt around the issue of interpretation. There are plenty of exceptions, work that comes out of Benjamin for example, but on the whole this at least has been my experience of critical discourse. What this means in knowledge terms is that critical theory won't come to grips with the fact of uncertainty. Hence the tremendous reluctance, until recently, to open up Marx's categories for cultural interpretation.

In psychoanalytic terms, interpretation probably means learning how to live with oneself after one has tried to destroy the object. We all try to destroy the object, even if only in fantasy. The wisdom of Melanie Klein and others is that if the object survives our bitter attack, then we can not only love the object, but learn to use it as well. But before we can achieve all this, we have to grant the object just enough independent existence so that the possibility of its loss is real, and we can learn to mourn this possible loss.[25]

True, this means a kind of depression. But depression is not so bad — if we have the courage to repair the damage it was caused by. After all, we ourselves have already imagined this destruction, perhaps willed it, without realizing what we were doing. The very idea of our own destructive potential makes us paranoid, because we didn't know what it meant until we had tried it. But if we can be so violent without meaning it, then so can others, even when they don't mean it. This is the essence of paranoid thinking: they're out to get me, even though I know they aren't.

Depression is much less catastrophic, though it is very painful. Recent critical theory is a case in point. Think of the titles: Negative Dialectics . . . The Tragedy of Enlightenment . . . The Dialectic of Defeat . . . The Critical Twilight . . . L'échange symbolique et la mort . . . La Stratégie fatale. It all sounds depressed. But this is probably a healthy depression, a reparative one, perhaps a depression that will lead critical theory to shift its attention away from all the bad things it wants to get rid of in the world, and onto the new things it wants to put into it. This is not just a therapeutic suggestion, it is a tactical necessity, because certain things will never go away completely, they can only be crowded out by something better. Pornography is an excellent example.

Critical Theory must try to find ways to open up transitional areas of experience, so that we can all breathe more freely. And so that eventually paternalistic systems will not be able to trap us with the impossible decision whether we made our own lives and language, or whether we just found them or got them from somebody else and owe them back. But Critical Theory won't achieve this level of creativity until it admits it is (metaphysically?) depressed — because only then will it have the impulse to repair the damage.

Adorno probably understood this. He was so impressed by his own violence as he saw it mirrored in the violence around him that he wanted all of us to get down off our "royal thrones" and commune with the object. But Adorno couldn't translate this theoretical understanding into practice. Neither have we — though in certain ways as a generation we may have begun in the 1960's, with the counterculture, and feminism. At any rate, Adorno was probably too old, and reluctant to give up his rage.

The possibility of any future practice, and the key to interesting interpretations, will depend on our realization that objects are never simply there to be used in the way we merely choose — for in the last, depth-psychological analysis, they always represent another person, and the idea of a relationship with another person.

Appendix: Theses on Critical Theory

I

After Marx, Freud revived the whole idea of bad animal nature as a kind of psychic myth, and resurrected evil as the political problem of human self-definition in history. Marx was right to have concentrated his attention on social relations instead, but Freud's regression was also very fruitful: in the end, he saved the imagination. After Freud, bad animal nature could be construed even more fundamentally as 'bad' relations between internal objects and their split-off, repressed ego counterparts. This does not mean, as a Marxist would say, that bad social relations are simply "reproduced" in the individual. Although bad animal nature is certainly a kind of myth, a hypostatization of bad relations in history, the ego defenses are quite real.

Sometimes the "bad object" has to be taken inside if the possibility of future love and pleasure is to be preserved somewhere in the imagination. We blame ourselves to save others and their love; and then we blame others to save ourselves. In all this effort to control and eliminate pain, love can wither. This is a tragedy that Marx overlooked.

The ego defenses are part of the distinctive organization and energy of psychic reality. They are not 'created' by bad relations, they are provoked, nurtured, encrusted, moulded — and they are powerful in their own right. At relatively crude levels, the form and perhaps even the content of social life are recognizably those of the ego defenses, and this is especially true during early emotional maturation. They are catalyzed prefigurations of human relations, and psychoanalysis is very little or nothing at all if they cannot ultimately be distinguished from the behaviourist thesis.

II

Critical theory should be more playful.

The inner world is fantastic. It is already in formation before cognition and emotion are prepared to join intelligently with the environment. The inner world, or psychic reality, is composed not of impulses or "instincts", but of internalized relations, which are not easily changed. Very early on in this inner world, there are at least good and bad. Neither the good nor the bad can develop into anything real or reasonable in life if they are not allowed to play. But the fantastic opposition of the good and the bad can generate so much anxiety that play seems impossible.

III

Critical theory is insufficiently fantastic.

Fantasy is thought and action before the imagination and the world have mutually adapted. Melanie Klein, following Freud, linked fantasy and play, and then demonstrated an inverse relationship between fantasy and anxiety. The more of one, the less of the other. But the relationship is not balanced. An inhibition in play is a sign of anxious rigidity; but it is never clear how one reverses the alignment in favour of fantasy and play: why elaborate a fantasy that provokes anxiety? Perhaps it will come true?

In this way, psychoanalysis restores the imagination to the life of the body politic — but at the price of its *de*-idealization.

IV

Freedom can increase.

There is no longer much reason to doubt that early experience (which is thankfully still beyond direct social control) is decisive in the formation of a reactive self governed by a compliant ego — or in the formation of its alternative, an active self centred on a critical ego. The problem is that where the alternative is not well-grounded in psychic reality, it is difficult to choose it (often for the best of reasons). Yet Sartre was probably right that the alternative is still a real choice. It is even a kind of choice in a deathcamp. Still, pure expressions of freedom, however modest, are very hard to reconcile with the continuities of psychic and social reality. The therapeutic lesson of psychoanalysis has been from the beginning that every recognition or understanding of determinism implies an act or experience of freedom and vice versa. There is no necessity to determinism, but it is necessary to be determined to be free.

V

Critical theory is generated within a very narrow band of human experience; it doesn't create enough space for itself.

An unusual environment is required if the active, wanting, willing tendencies of a baby are to be reconciled with the emotional challenge of separation and individuation. In the absence of such a tender environment, action, wanting and willing are likely to be split-off and hidden away, remaining for ever infantile and sorely helpless.

Nobody outlives the pleasure of being alone, yet still in the safe presence of the (m)other, once they have had it. We are always in transition and we always create some kind of "space" for this process. It cannot be played out.

VI

The fragility of the potential space between the subject and the object can be so attenuated in life that play becomes a desperate effort to sustain the meaning of a few hardened symbols which are easily coerced and harnessed. The space in which the unity of earlier and later experience is preserved as the growing fund of the self's life in the world and the psyche's life on the planet can be overrun by the conquering drive of subject or object, or collapsed in pathological identity, omnipotent fusion, and the logic of defensive control, none of which ever outlast what they destroy. Critical theory should be much more aware of all this.

VII

On the other hand, the unusually tender environment which fosters the growth of the active self is precisely what makes the prospect of separation and indivuation so painful. It is very hard to learn to create this environment for oneself, and harder for society. A certain amount of "aggression" is needed on all sides if the process is to be carried through — a fact observable in mammals generally. But the human psyche is initially so adaptive and responsive and innately intricate in potential that its birth is never easily achieved. "Nature" has refined a process of specialized differentiation to the point where not only its

meaning but its substance are astonishingly symbolic.

The price of intelligence is probably symbolism which thrives on indefinition which reflects difficulty but the higher forms of pleasure too.

VIII

Critical theory has made a great deal of fuss about (what should be called) *secondary* adaptation — as if this is some sort of recognition of psychoanalytic truth. Over and over again, we hear that the individual is "produced" by the culture. In the same breath, psychoanalysis is dismissed as conformist because its theme is the adaptive growth of the individual. Critique is cheap when it ignores or laughs at the needs and strategies of the child. Human beings are always dependent — either in an infantile or a nature way — but dependent nevertheless.

IX

Coercion can be brutally external and social but its conditions of possibility are usually laid down in subtler ways. To achieve a genuine integration of psychoanalytic insight, critical theory must see how primary psychological adaptions are not always in detail directly concerned with the culture at large: they are not political decisions, they are obscure movements within the immediate psychic environment in a context of infantile dependency. Such awareness would weaken the grandiose illusion that critical dialetic can so easily penetrate the social veil; but it would strengthen understanding immeasurably.

X

Nature is perfectly capable of pathology, which is contained grossly in the painful difficulty of choice. Choosing and symbolizing are perfectly natural — we only pretend that they are opposed to nature because we forget that choosing is living, symbols are breathing, and neither choice nor symbol flicks on and off in dimensionless moments of pure rationality and morality. Nature can decide itself, but it often does so in painful and difficult ways, and a lot of this is localized in us. Being human is like being told that the result depends on you but fie on you if you think you know what the process is.

As painful, difficult, deciding parts of the universe, we need mediations. For this reason, critical theory should pay a great deal more attention to the symbolic and to the pressures and limits of the symbolic because it is at this deep level that we actually play out the limits of nature. We create the mediations we need ourselves and we are responsible for the quality of the mediations we create. Or to put it another way, we are almost entirely symbolic in our difference, but this is a responsibility rather than a transcendence: symbols are natural beings.

XI

We should not be overly ashamed of our feeble-mindedness with regard to the Symbolic, however. Critical theory continues to elaborate its fantasy without imagining too seriously that it can ever bring the Symbolic to heel. That is probably a good thing, for the exciting alternative is only an illusion: the illusion of Power, the hallucination of the elimination of the object — all in the name of

personal or collective transcendence. People are liable to call for the end of the object (which might be another person) because as everybody knows it is so easy for us to project the unwanted onto the object. But not only can nature not be transcended, it cannot even be tricked. Obsessional control, paranoid vigilance, schizoid detachment, psychotic misery — all are relatively useless paralyses of human fantasy.

The bad object has its place; it may be the loser, but it never ceases to exist as a possibility which must be accounted for in the existence of the good object. If prolonged, splitting, perhaps the most basic form of control, destroys the mediating power of symbolization. This is why potential space cannot easily be divided up in a worthwhile way. The bad, after all, is every bit as symbolic as the good.

Montréal

Notes

1. This is a slightly altered version of a paper delivered at the CJPST's "1983 Theory Workshops" University of British Columbia, Learned Societies, June, 1983.

2. The trend away from classical mechanistic atomism in psychoanalytic theory has been developing in Britain since the 1930's in a variety of quite different ways which have been grouped together under the heading "Object-Relations Theory." The object-relations theorists include, notably: Melanie Klein, Joan Rivière, and Hanna Segal (all of whom have never been able to give up the idea of a "death-instinct"); W.R.D. Fairbairn and Harry Guntrip (theoretically the most coherent group); and D.W. Winnicott and Marion Milner.

   The term "Object-relations theory" can be extended to include the work of some American psychoanalysts, such as Edith Jacobson and Otto Kernberg, and more remotely, the late Heinz Kohut. But this important American work has been hampered by clinging to dubious orthodoxies such as "primary narcissism" and "narcissistic libido."

   A prominent Canadian member of the British school is W. Clifford M. Scott, in Montreal.

   It is difficult to summarize briefly the object-relations point of view. It involves a clinically-inspired shift away from concern with instinctual development and management to an exploration of the emotional layerings of emerging ego-object structures. The potential ego is no longer viewed as inherently the "servant of three masters" — the somewhat schizoid defense centre of classical Freudian theory. Very often, however, so much of the ego is split off or repressed during development that a detached, reactive surface structure is all that remains of the outwardly functioning personality.

   (Some reflections on critical theory from an object-relations point of view are sketched in the Appendix to this article.)

3. The fundamental anxiety which underlies this ever-collapsing distinction is discussed from a psychoanalytic and ecological point of view by Harold F. Searles in *The Nonhuman Environment* (New York: International Universities Press, 1960).

4. Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

5. In *Le système des objets* (Paris: Denoel-Gonthier, 1968) and *La société de consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

6. "Compte Rendu de Marshall MacLuhan (sic): *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man," L'Homme et la société,* no. 5 (1967), p. 230.

7. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* trans. and introd. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981).

8. One can see how this is rather like an historicized reading of Kant's thing-in-itself problem. For interesting discussions on this theme, see, among other works of Theodor W. Adorno: "The Actuality of Philosophy," *Telos,* no. 31 (1977), p. 128; *Negative Dialectics,* trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), Part 111; and "Subject and Object," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader,* ed. and introd. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), passim.

9. The deep inner connection between this short-circuiting of social communication and the structure of the commodity is analysed by Baudrillard in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* Ch. 8.

10. I am referring to the fact that since *L'échange symbolique et la mort,* Baudrillard has made a nonsense of critical theory as it is understood by most of its practitioners, especially the followers of Habermas.

11. For Baudrillard, the rise of the commodity coincides historically with the passage from symbolic to semiological societies. The recent development is not the rise of the sign (consumerism), but the collapse of the rationality of signification, which has shifted the problem of the social object away from the commodity and onto simulated totalities.

12. It should be pointed out that this argument by itself does not commit Baudrillard to radical indeterminism. On the contrary, his argument seems to be, not that there is no longer any referentiality in neo-capitalist culture, but that there is altogether too much of it: reference is no longer an *act;* it is something received in combinatory forms.

13. See, for example, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectics of Enlightenment,* trans. John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), p. 158.

14. See the article, "Beyond Use Value" in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign.*

15. See "Design and Environment," in *For a Critique; L'échange symbolique et la mort* and all subsequent works by Baudrillard.

16. See *L'échange symbolique et la mort,* where Baudrillard's expressions of utter despair at the involution of post-modern social life can be read as brilliant parodic critiques of Derrida, Deleuze, Barthes, Foucault and Kristeva. Baudrillard's *Oublier Foucault* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1977) is perhaps the best example of his technique of dilating a mimetic theoretical description language.

17. Karl Marx, *Capital,* 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Richard Aveling, ed., Frederick Engels (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 75.

18. Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader, pp. 278-279.*

19. See any edition of the *Communist Manifesto* or Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft),* trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), passim.

20. Jean Baudrillard, *La société de consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), passim; and "The Ideological Genesis of Needs," in *For a Critique.*

21. "I am drawing attention to the *paradox* involved in the use by the infant of what I have called the transitional object. My contribution is to ask for a paradox to be accepted and tolerated and respected, and for it not to be resolved (by) flight to split-off intellectual functioning..." D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1971), p. xii.

22. Winnicott, p. 118.

23. "Once radically parted from the object, the subject reduces it to its own measure; the subject swallows the object, forgetting how much it is an object itself." Theodor Adorno, "Subject and Object," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, p. 499. Congealed fantasies of devouring the other or of being devoured by the other are of course often discovered at the roots of persecurory anxiety and guilty thinking.

24. See my "Introduction to Baudrillard" in John Fekete, ed., *The Structural Allegory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming).

25. Winnicott, "The Use of an Object and Relating through Identifications," in *Playing and Reality*, pp. 101-111. For the Kleinian point of view, see Hanna Segal, 'Notes on Symbol-Formation," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 38 (1957), pp. 391-397.

26. These reflections owe something to a midsummer night's conversation with John Fekete on Prince Edward Island.