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Radical Illusion (A Game Against)

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There are two voices in the work of Jean Baudrillard, the early voice, which lasted less than 10 years, and the mature voice, which lasted about 30. The first voice is younger and more conventionally leftist. It was fully embedded in the intellectual debates of the late 1960s. A committed Marxist, the younger Baudrillard wrote on labor and needs, use-value and production. But after this period as a young man, Baudrillard transitioned into a very different thinker in the middle to late 1970s. He developed a whole new theoretical vocabulary that was completely in tune with that decade's historical transformation into digitization, postindustrial economies, immaterial labor, mediation, and simulation. His theories of play and games are at the very heart of this transformation. Through a close reading of several texts, this essay explores Baudrillard's interest in play and games through the concepts of seduction, the fatal strategy, illusion, and what he called the "principle of separation."

Keywords: Baudrillard; game; play; seduction; illusion; separative cause

He often wrote on games. The rules of the game, the Great Game, a double game, a zero-sum game. Collusion ("to play a game together"). Illusion ("in play" or "a game against"). A *jeu de catastrophe*. Garry Kasparov versus Deep Blue. "The Lottery in Babylon." The Sex Olympics.

Games and play might be the single thing, statistically speaking, that he wrote most about, more so than any of his core passwords: seduction, the fatal strategy, catastrophe, ecstasy, the obscene, extermination, symbolic exchange, the perfect crime, evil, art, or even that term beaten senseless in the secondary literature, simulation.

After a period as a young man, following various Marxian and semiotic concerns, Jean Baudrillard transitioned into a very different thinker in the middle to late 1970s. His 1979 book *Seduction* is the first in this elder phase, and it is the first text in which he deploys the concepts of play and games with any regularity. Seduction is a "game," he writes, a space of "play and defiance" (Baudrillard, 1979, p. 37).¹ By the end of his life, games and play had metastasized, infecting the entire corpus of his thought, so much so that *game* came to be a synonym for *world*, or for *life*, or in a very general sense for the ontological plane itself. In his book about September 11, 2001, he writes on the "rules of the game" as a synonym for our contemporary reality: "One must accept the evidence that a new terrorism has arrived, a new form of activity that games the system and appropriates the rules of the game in order to

better disrupt it" (Baudrillard, 2002a, p. 27). Likewise, when he writes of singularities as the true antiglobalization forces, he uses similar language. "They invent their game and their own rules of the game" (Baudrillard, 2002b, p. 74). Elsewhere he writes that "the rule of the game is in a process of changing" as a result of techno-scientific knowledge, thus indicating the fundamentally gamic quality of the world (Baudrillard, 2000b, p. 66).

In Baudrillard, games are a way to understand large complex processes. The collapse of the World Trade Center "came out of a kind of unpredictable complicity. It is as if the entire system, by virtue of its own internal frailty, began to play at self-liquidation, and hence joined up with the terrorists' game" (Baudrillard, 2002b, p. 16). In this passage, the word *game* refers first to the entire process of collapse, both material and symbolic, of the World Trade Center and of what Baudrillard calls the "perfect crime" of Western societies. (The collapse is, in this sense, an example of that thing that for Baudrillard is very rare indeed: an event.) But at the same time, *game* also refers to terrorism itself, which for Baudrillard is a sort of suicide solution within the hegemonic structure. This is what Reza Negarestani (2006), in an exceptionally smart summation of the present world predicament, calls the "necrosis" of global civilian populations. The transparency of evil (of the West) is matched by the pure evil of the suicide bomber. In this sense, *game* is a generic term in Baudrillard referring to large, complex transformations within the real. It is—to use slightly more grandiose language—a term describing the ontological plane of being. A "game" for him is something that speaks to presence itself.

Both sovereignty and resistance are gamic in Baudrillard. He speaks of a "hypothesis desperate to the core" by virtue of which "we are bound to play out the flawless logic of a global power capable of absorbing all resistance, all antagonism" (Baudrillard, 2002b, p. 29). The key issue here is less his pessimism and more his claim that "the flawless logic of a global power" is something that we are obligated to play out. Power is in the form of a play, a playful power. But also a power play, the *mis en scène* of power.

Note the dramatic opposition between this notion of gamic play and previous speculations from Roger Caillois or Johan Huizinga. Both Caillois and Huizinga have a theory of play rooted in Kant. For them, a game is a "finality without end."² Even a whimsical or lyrical game involves certain definite actions and aspirations for finality. But when the game is up, those same intense ambitions for completion in victory are cast off and sealed tightly within the ludic dream space. They seep not into the larger teleological one-upmanship of daily life. In their view, the rapture of play suspends all earthbound mandates, commercial, practical, or otherwise. Contrary to this, Baudrillard's is a characteristically poststructuralist notion of play, one shared by Jacques Derrida as well, whereby play is not an external "magic circle" that one visits by way of a ritualized excursion beyond the confines of real life. Instead, Baudrillard's play is the real itself. His is thus the diametric opposite of Caillois' (1967) claim that games are "circumscribed within limits of space and time" and that they are "accompanied by a particular consciousness of a second reality or an open irreality over and against normal

life” (p. 43). This is Baudrillard’s Hegelianism: He would never claim that there is a second reality that exists against normal life, precisely for the reason that “normal life” is always already a “second reality” from the get-go.

The most interesting passage in Caillois’ (1967) book on play, which I include for its excellent contribution to the notion of institutional critique, is still nevertheless entirely incompatible with Baudrillard:

It is worthwhile and fruitful to seize upon the affinity that exists between play and the secret or the mysterious. However this collusion should not be part of the definition of play, for play is almost always defined via the spectacular or the ostentatious. The secret, the mysterious—basically anything in “drag”—doubtless transforms itself into play activity. But I should also immediately add that this activity necessarily exerts itself in opposition to the secret and the mysterious. It exposes it, publishes it, and in a certain sense, *expends* it. In a word, it tends to decommission its own nature. On the other hand, when the secret, the mask, or the costume is used as sacrament, one can be certain that there is not a game happening but an institution. Mystery, simulacra, or anything of that nature is close to play. Moreover it must be that the role of fiction and amusement is to carry it off, that is, that the mysterious would no longer be revered and that the simulacrum would not be a start or indicator of metamorphoses and possession.³ (Caillois, 1967, pp. 33-34)

One should invert the logic of each sentence to arrive at Baudrillard’s position on things. Caillois’ concern is between the spectacular and the hidden, with play exposing the latter via a performance of the former. Whereas in Baudrillard both mystery and spectacle are equally unreal. To “expose” or to “publish” is part of what Baudrillard calls the obscene; they are not at all the provenance of seduction or of play. “Mystery, simulacra, or anything of that nature”—a definition of the real if there ever was one. The real is play. The “virtual” is emphatically not the gamic for Baudrillard; it is this world that is the game. The magic circle is part of the here and now.

Nevertheless, Baudrillard cannot resist returning to Caillois on a few occasions, generally to indicate how a few privileged game types are on the ascendancy in contemporary life. Starting from Caillois’ multipart classification scheme for games, Baudrillard suggests that chance games (*alea*) and vertigo games (*ilinx*) are the two types that have taken over today. So although Baudrillard certainly approves of the ludic in general, he decries this new trend as symptomatic of an “ecstatic, solitary, and narcissistic” epoch; *alea* and *ilinx* games “no longer imply any scene play, no mirror play, no play of defiance or alterity,” he laments (Baudrillard, 1987b, p. 23).⁴

In Baudrillard, the ludic is a space that is, as it were, beyond good and evil. His term is *immoral*, which I shall interpret essentially as “metamoral” to avoid the normative tinge that *amoral* or *immoral* must necessarily afford. Here he writes on the “immoral” with great reverence:

There might be a moral circle, that of commodity exchange, and an immoral circle, that of play, where the only thing that counts is the gamic event itself and the advent of a shared rule. To share a rule is something entirely different than referring oneself to a

common general equivalent. One must be completely involved in order to play. It creates a type of relation between the players that is more dramatic than commodity exchange could achieve. In such a relation, individuals are not abstract beings who can be swapped one for another. Each has a position of singularity opposite the stakes of victory or defeat, of life or death.⁵ (Baudrillard, 2000b, p. 23)

Play generates singularities. Play bucks the corrupting influence of systems of exchange. Commodity exchange is a "moral" sphere for Baudrillard because it creates criteria for winners and losers, not because the system itself is morally defensible. Thus in entering an "immoral," or metamoral, state, one is able to experience the artifice of the real in all its seductive beauty.

In this sense, play is a general critical methodology in Baudrillard. As he says about evil, "play it up, play it back, play it out [*en jouer, s'en jouer et le déjouer*]" (Baudrillard, 2000b, p. 48). "The great game of seduction," he writes, referring to one of the most important concepts in his entire lexicon, "is less a play on desire than it is a play with desire. Seduction does not negate it, nor is it its opposite, but it puts it in play. . . . It is the sphere in which a being's play-making [*mise en jeu*] is a sort of professional practice" (Baudrillard, 2000b, pp. 33-34).⁶ Play, therefore, is firmly connected to seduction and thus is also at the heart of the more hopeful, or shall we say, politically progressive, wing of Baudrillard's thought. The play of thinking will destroy the perfect crime of positivism, he suggests. "Yes, there's a violence of interpretation," he says elsewhere. "One must do violence to the facts and the evidence" (Baudrillard, 1997b, p. 128).⁷ Is this a denialism, an antirealist delusion? Not exactly. Baudrillard is opposed to the sort of thinking that fixes everything in advance, such that all uncertainty is preempted by the logic of a system that desires to know the future as well as it knows the past. "There is in the temporality of words," he writes, "an almost poetic play of death and rebirth" (Baudrillard, 2000b, p. 10). Like Derrida or Roland Barthes, Baudrillard sees language as the seat of play: "Fundamentally, the use of language is how we meet up with, not an instinctive animality, but a radicality of forms. While belonging to the domain of illusion, language allows us to play with that same illusion" (Baudrillard, 1997b, p. 84).⁸ Thus an illusion does not mean that one is playing with the real, for this would position Baudrillard within an age-old philosophical tradition of falsehood versus truth, ideology versus enlightenment. No, illusion for Baudrillard means that one is playing *with play*. His notion of play is an internally redundant one. It is tautological rather than normative. "The play of the seducer is *with himself*" (Baudrillard, 1979, p. 148).

This is essentially the crux of the argument in his book on the 1991 Gulf War: The war was a nonevent not primarily because it was a media spectacle; it was a nonevent because every move, every outcome, every drop of blood both spilt and withheld, was already planned, modeled, and simulated in advance, exterminating all possibility of the unknown or the unexpected. (His word for this, perhaps counterintuitively, is a *catastrophe*; the converse future, open and unplanned, is a *destiny*.)⁹ In other words,

the Gulf War was a nonevent because of the logical precision of the Powell Doctrine, which determines the outcome of warfare before it even begins, not simply because of the real-time information of CNN—this point in Baudrillard is often misunderstood. Elsewhere he christens this “meteorological” thought, that is, a way of thinking that works entirely within a logic of statistical modeling, prediction, risk analysis, preemption, and so on. Instead, Baudrillard (2000b) suggests that thought “must make uncertainty a rule of the game. But thought must realize that it plays without a possible conclusion, within a definitive form of illusion or play-making [*mise en jeu*]” (pp. 101-102). This is precisely Baudrillard’s quarrel with Michel Foucault, that the celebrated historian’s discourse is “a fluid objectivity, a writing that is nonlinear, orbital, and without fault” (Baudrillard, 1977, p. 10). The same power described in Foucault is mirrored by the very rhetoric of Foucault, majestic and totalizing. “In the perfect crime,” Baudrillard would write later, “it is the *perfection* that is criminal” (Baudrillard, 2000b, p. 75; emphasis added).¹⁰ Foucault’s own virtuosity as a thinker returns in the form of a totalitarian discourse. What could be worse for Baudrillard?

The Computer’s Melancholia

Here is the philosopher’s analysis of the series of chess games played in 1996 and 1997 between Garry Kasparov and the IBM computer Deep Blue (the computer lost the first round of matches but won the second):

For Kasparov there is an opponent, there is an other. But for Deep Blue there is nothing across the table, no other, no adversary. Deep Blue progresses within the world of its own programming. . . . Now this is exactly where one can imagine man to be definitively superior, far beyond the mental power of number crunching: in this relation of alterity which is based on giving up his own thought. This is something that Deep Blue will never know. It’s the subtle presupposition of play. It is here that man may set himself out in terms of illusion, of decoy, of defiance, of seduction, of sacrifice. The computer understands little of this strategy of weakness, of a game played below one’s skill level, because it is condemned to play always at maximum capacity. This omission, this ellipsis of presence by which you bring the other to life, even in the case of a microprocessor’s virtual ego, is the real thinking of game play. . . . Obviously with a simulacrum one must play against nature. (Baudrillard, 1997a, pp. 183-184)

One must play against nature—what a marvelous formulation. Using Baudrillard’s lexicon, Kasparov creates a “scene” whereas Deep Blue is forever the “obscene.” The only response to the perfect catastrophe, the philosopher suggests, is seduction. It is always *mis en scène* that must win out over objective realism. Stage play over power play. Blue’s promiscuity, its total machinic immediacy, is only ever countered by a fatal strategy of otherness, of separation. The pornography of the ultraclose is countered by a dramaturgy of distancing (or what Martin Heidegger called, in a twist of the term one degree further, “de-distancing”).

Baudrillard (1997a) continues,

Now, the machine's ultimate end (its hidden ambition perhaps?) is to be perfect, unbeatable, and immortal. In this the machine understands nothing of the essence of play, and for this reason it will always get beaten in the end, if not by an opponent, then at least by play itself. . . . Thus the machine may be insurmountable in all sorts of tasks, but it is forever handicapped—forever out of play—when it tries to approach the essence of play. (p. 185)

Perfect, unbeatable and immortal, this again is what Baudrillard calls a catastrophe. Etymologically, the catastrophe, as “down turning,” is not too far from another concept in Heidegger, that of falling; in Deleuze the word is *territorialization*; in Badiou, *representation*. Each describes the process of sloughing into a fixity of routine, a known rhythm, or clichéd habituation. As a perfect precision of code, Deep Blue is the perfect catastrophe. On the other hand, the very essence of game playing—which in Baudrillard means seduction, dramaturgy, otherness, distancing, relinquishment, illusion, sacrifice, metaphor, *mis en scène*—is an expression of finitude, of withdrawing and submission within a universe of illusion.

This is why in Baudrillard, *simulation* is often a metonym for his entire body of work. There is no clean-versus-dirty binarism in Baudrillard, no hacker hero who can unplug from the matrix. (My apologies to the Wachowski brothers who, on this point at least, misread their master.) Yes, there are “events” and “singularities” and “voids” in Baudrillard’s cosmos, but his Gnosticism keeps these firmly at bay, trapped in a messianic kairotope of perpetual deferral. Both Kasparov and Deep Blue are neck deep in the fog of the hyperreal. They are both living in a thicket of fictions upon fictions. The difference is that only Kasparov can seduce Blue; Blue is unable to seduce Kasparov. Mathematically speaking, Baudrillard’s is the “absolute value” of the dialectic.

The trick, though, is that there are different modalities of the hyperreal. Not negations precisely, they are alternations “on an artificial earth,” to ape the elegant expression of Iain Hamilton Grant. First, there is the short-circuit modality of Deep Blue, the expedient, declarative modality of pure machinic transparency, pure abstraction, frictionless symbolic exchange. After all, computers are entirely artificial or “simulated.” This is true. But second, there is the artifice of seduction, of psychic complicity and oblivion, that accompanies any game player’s experience of illusion or magic. This, too, is an artifice of simulation. The former is what Baudrillard calls evil, the catastrophe, the perfect crime, the ecstasy of communication, lucidity, the banality of the system; the latter is what he calls aesthetic illusion, seduction, phantasm, singularity, or in a slightly different context, a “fatal strategy.” As the philosopher puts it, we can play with Deep Blue because we invented it, but the computer will only become a true player *when it invents us*.

The genius of cybernetics was to drive the Other to extinction. As he writes, “The perfect crime destroys alterity, the other. It is the kingdom of the same” (Baudrillard,

2000b, p. 78). The origin of the word *extinction* is delightful in its redundancy: from the Latin prefix *ex*, meaning “out,” and the root *stinguere*, meaning “to put out or quench.” One can never simply drive the Other out, because of the fact that expulsion is the structural genesis of the Other to begin with. Instead, to make the Other ex-tinct one must put it out *out*. “Only the redoubling of the sign truly puts an end to what it designates” (Baudrillard, 2002b, p. 12). Or, as Baudrillard put it once, in the middle of an almost autobiographical litany of hypertrophic phenomena, “Disappearance of the Other into its double” (Baudrillard, 2000a, p. 22).

This is why simulation gets so much traction in Baudrillard, even to the point of cliché in the writing of his detractors (who for the most part never understood a word he wrote): Both sides of the fence are equally artificial. There is no “before” and “after” in Baudrillard. There is certainly no liberation rhetoric around “mystical shells” versus “rational kernels.” There is only a choice between “disenchanted simulation” and “enchanted simulation.”¹¹ Both are equally unreal, even if the former is expressive and overt (obscene). The, as it were, moral question in Baudrillard—I only hesitate because the specific term *moral* is so scarce in his writings, even if a stern conscience dominates throughout—the moral question, the thing that most stokes his undying scorn toward the present state of the world, is simply that of picking and choosing between two mystical reals: the “perfect crime” of positivism on one hand or the “fatal strategy” of play on the other. What shall it be, the magic of a pure economism or the magic of ritual play? Of course, either selection is equally unreal. The first conjures the unreality of fascism, whereas the second the unreality of the phantasm. This is also why Baudrillard took so easily to writing about virtual reality, when his *soixante-huit* peers never wrote anything interesting about it. Baudrillard was doing virtual reality before the fact, and so the advent of the actually existing cyberspace of the 1980s and ’90s was nothing more than an obscene extension of his own familiar critical turf. Schtroumpfland, Gulf War 1, or Second Life are all equally obscene, equally criminal, equally pornographic, but still at the same time equally unreal.

***Nous* Governs the World**

“They did it, but we wanted it”—a key to his general ontology (Baudrillard, 2002a, p. 11).¹² The wanting is here. The doing is there. *Nous* (mind, intellect) is near—yes, it is most likely ours or, like Heidegger, *mine*. But the material doing of *physis* (nature) is always there, it is Other. *Physis* withdraws, but *nous* draws with. The “we” is always in spirit, but the “they” is always in deed. (What delicious cataclysm if the “we” was in deed and the “they” was in spirit! Would this not be that form of society whose name is banished from all discourse?) There is thus a segregation effect at the heart of his ontology. As such, a more specialized term is required: Baudrillard’s *metaphysics*.

Oh bankrupt world, oh depraved divisions—not simply of object and spirit but of the unworthy and the acclaimed—why are metaphysics and injustice so perfectly

aligned? The one is a foil for the other. In his diaries, Baudrillard (2000a) observes the *sans abri* of the street:

Her things are always there. She doesn't throw any of them away. She cares for them just as she would her own body. They have no right to decay before she does. The more humble and down-trodden they are, the more they have a right to exist. Existence is all that remains with them—just as with her, and it's not much. Those who do great things have no need to exist. Existence is for the poor, a poverty of desire, poverty of pleasure, and poverty of spirit. The rich have projects, but beggars have only their things.¹³ (pp. 40-41)

We want and wish; they do. The rich have projects, spirit, *nous*. The poor have *physis* and nothing else. We have the privilege of the ontological; they the ontical. Heidegger: Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it *is* ontological. Baudrillard: The poor are ontically indistinctive; they *are* ontical.¹⁴ The poor can only possess phatic expression—and in this sense the French riots of October 2005 were like a mobile phone conversation: “Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now?”—but the rich have the luxury to end all expression entirely.¹⁵ Is it metaphysics that is amoral? No, it is the amoral itself, pure evil, that exudes its own real world, just as sure as the earth turns.

Baudrillard's work offers a sort of inverted Molyneux's question for the new millennium. Imagine if you will a human being who from birth has been saturated with freedom, democracy, identity, and connectivity. If his singularity were suddenly restored to him, would he be able to recognize it?¹⁶ “A cosmic precedent: the parting of the light and the world becomes visible. Second mutation: the parting of thought and the world becomes intelligible. Third phase: it disappears?” (Baudrillard, 2000a, p. 121).¹⁷ A reinvention of Molyneux's question for the new millennium would require not the sudden onset of optical lucidity but exactly the reverse: the removal of the lucidity pact, the lucidity *patch* from the eye, bringing an abrogation of all laws governing cognition and sense. The subject is deaf, dumb, blind, and unfeeling in the absence of all sense input. It disappears? “It disappears”? He is suddenly a singularity. And would he know it? It would be an event.

Don't ever forget that the real is only a model for simulation, for regulation, for fixation of the radical becoming, of the radical illusion of the world and its appearances, a model for the reduction of all internal singularity, of events, of beings and things to the common denominator of reality. (Baudrillard, 1997b, p. 129)

“Radical becoming” and “radical illusion”; what is their status? Are they the really-real beyond the real-as-simulation? For there is a beyond, is there not, in Baudrillard's ontology, even if he rarely speaks of it? What does he mean by “world as it is”? (Baudrillard, 1997b, p. 129). Is Baudrillard simply a romantic in wolf's clothing? There is “something within us,” he writes, that is beyond the bleak reality of accumulation and production.¹⁸ There is an “incalculable force” waiting off in the wings somewhere, only to implode in “events” such as May 1968 or October 2005

(Baudrillard, 1979, p. 80). Or as in the 1991 Gulf War, he makes reference to “the substance of fact,” which exists beyond the war, itself a nonevent, and which emerges from what he calls the void (1991, p. 22).¹⁹ Is *metaphysical* an unfaithful epithet for such a philosophy of the world?

He thinks not: “My point of view is completely metaphysical,” he admitted to his publisher and interlocutor Sylvère Lotringer. “If anything, I’m a metaphysician” (Baudrillard, 1987a, p. 84).²⁰ Indeed, starting in the late 1970s, a certain Gnosticism is evident in his writings. Radical illusion (the game against) is the spiritual salvation from this fallen, repugnant reality assaulting us on all sides. What could be worse than the existence of the real? Instead, games and play offer a way to transcend the world through a process of becoming. It is what Christian theologians call grace.

Many have lamented, if he did not exist he would surely have been invented. But it is precisely the opposite. If Baudrillard were not invented, he would have to exist. This is the crux of his thought: *Nous* generates *physis*. The artifice runs before the real. Invention before existence. He is like some dark avatar of Hegel but with the dialectic neutered and inverted into pure, ugly positivity. Again, mathematically speaking, this is the “absolute value” of the dialectic. “To positivize the world,” is mankind’s lot in life (Baudrillard, 2000b, p. 35). The real in Baudrillard is always already an expression of what in Hegel was provocatively termed “Objective Thought” or, in another delightful turn of phrase, a “petrified intelligence”; the real is second nature for both philosophers, it is “nature as the system of unconscious thought” (Hegel, 1975, p. 37). In the ancient epigram of Anaxagoras (the pre-Socratic whom Hegel loved most), *nous* governs the world. Baudrillard would likely agree that *nous* governs the world, but it is a blank *nous*, an undead intellect that fled the spongy innards of human skulls long ago only to waft back from the far corners of our lived surroundings dirty and smelling of sulfur. “Reality is a principle,” writes Baudrillard (2002a), “the ultimate and most redoubtable fiction” (pp. 38-39). He is a Hegelian, but a dark and inverted Gnostic Hegel. To read Baudrillard is to experience an overwhelming disgust for the present state of the world. There is Jacques Rancière’s (2007) *Hatred of Democracy* or Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer’s (2001) *Hatred of Capitalism*. But the implicit subtitle to every Baudrillard text ever written was always *Hatred of the Real*.

The Separative Cause

There exist causes from whose nature some effect does not follow. There exist causes that preempt their own effects from coming to be. In an early text from 1969, “Play and the Police,” Baudrillard (2001a) speaks of a “principle of separation.” This principle is how he rethinks repression not through the notions of negation, aggression, or vital forces being blocked but through the concepts of ambiance, integration, and participation. The “unity of desire” is broken, he suggests, into a never ending series of

private-sphere negotiations. The question becomes Am *I* liberated? not Are *we*? “The separative cause, which bursts through the unity of desire and establishes human activity across several zones . . . is most effective at neutralizing energies” (Baudrillard, 2001a, pp. 18-19). Thus, in what Deleuze would describe later as the distinction between discipline and control, Baudrillard here posits a model of repression *through* expression, a stunting of the drives *through* the very facilitation of those drives into new control spaces. A new ambiance permeates the social field. The masses are not repressed, no never, they are allowed to dream! With reference to Marcuse’s concept of “repressive desublimation,” Baudrillard (2001a) calls this “the repression of desire . . . through the emancipation of needs” (p. 20).

Again, “they did it, but we wanted it.” The separative cause reveals how ideology and reification operate under neoliberalism. Summarize it like this: *Exploitation is material, liberation is semiotic*. The material is the realm of political failure; the social is the realm of utopian compromise. In Baudrillard, the principle of separation is the principle by which the two are segregated and divided into two distinct domains, the one to play the fool for the other.

The separative cause has two steps. To achieve some semblance of pedagogical coherence, I will telescope them into a cause-and-effect narrative, but to be precise, Step 1 and Step 2 both happened at the same time.

In Step 1, the given phenomenon, which exists primordially as an undivided problematic containing both progressive and reactionary political impulses, is first separated into (a) a material modality and (b) a social modality. For example, with global warming, there is the material modality of carbon dioxide emissions, automobiles and roads, the oil industry, and so on, while at the same time there is the symbolic social modality of desiring clean air, “thinking green,” and the so-called awareness campaigns.

The principle of separation occasions the phenomenon first through an alliance formed between the progressive political impulse and the domain of the social or public sphere. A progressive moral horizon of significant magnitude invests itself in the social sphere. This moral plane develops its own independent logic and will likely experience a flourishing cycle of achievement and resolution but always within the “symbolic” realm of the social or public sphere. From time to time, small material changes may be incorporated into the logic of moral resolution but only those minor enough not to impinge upon the superiority of the social.

In Step 2, the progressive political impulse is *negated* and as negation finds its home in the domain of the material. Thus a reactionary political project blossoms within the realm of the physical world. This project realizes its ends, developing the necessary mechanisms and infrastructures required to continue and grow.

In Baudrillard, the separative cause is this overall structure. What the separative cause occasions, or “makes present,” is the ability for both gratuitous exploitation and a heightened moral instinct to coexist within the same universe. It is perhaps seen best in Baudrillard’s controversial critique of sexual liberation in Part 1 of *Seduction*. A structure of both liberation and deferral, of dazzlement and insight, of

both ignorance and realization, of both expression and silence—all sides unify together but only at the cost of a complete and incontrovertible segregation between the symbolic and the material. The progressive stance of the one allows for the reactionary stance of the other. The end result is the current state of affairs: an oil company that is nevertheless “green,” a world bathed in blood but devoted to peace, a global consumer product that is still tagged “fair trade.”

The separative cause occasions. But it occasions a “presence,” a presence that must be crossed out or held in suspension with quotation marks. The presence occasioned by the separative cause is in fact an abatement of presence, a lessening of being. What it makes present is a structure of suspension. A “subject” is the name given to those entities able to flourish within such a structure of suspension.

As Baudrillard was able to see, most all phenomena in contemporary life are occasioned through this “separative cause” or principle of separation. The environmental movement is a perfect example. In today’s world, it is structurally impractical if not outright impossible to be an environmentalist in any true sense. Imagine: An activist drives to a rally against global warming. The contradiction is clear. His actual spiritual liberation is undercut by the tailpipe fumes of his own expression. His intentions are good, but there is a physical base—that depraved automobile contraption—that creates conditions of impossibility that are symbolically if not practically insurmountable. Of course, many today refuse to participate in the global system of environmental exploitation by casting off all worldly possessions. But this comes at the cost of complete withdrawal from the world system, a price too high to pay for most. Like the computer at the heart of today’s planetary organization, the costs are thus *binary* in that they offer an all-or-nothing option, but only an “option” insofar as the nothing is reified into material reality and the all spins on into oblivion. This is how the separative cause operates.

Other examples include the curious and no doubt tense axis of inaction forged between the United Nations and American foreign policy after the new millennium on issues such as Darfur peace: the symbolic assertion on the side of the United States that, in no uncertain terms, “this is genocide,” flanked only by a negation of that same claim in abandonment and blindness within the realm of real material commitment. Or consider the structural adjustment agreements of the International Monetary Fund, which travel on wings of hope to the so-called backward economies of the globe but carry enclosed the harshest austerity measures, leaving the infected country with a curse of legalized deterritorialization and fiscal and cultural subjugation for decades to come. *Exploitation is material, liberation is semiotic*. This is how the separative cause occasions, or brings to presence, certain phenomena in today’s global kingdom. The democratization of Iraq is realizable only through subjugation; clean air is realizable only through a futures market in “pollution credits”—and around and around. Might this separative cause be also known by a synonym twin, “civilization”? In Baudrillard, the term was simply *the real*. It occasions real human worlds by allowing them to come to be.

The 1960s in France lasted until about 1974 or 1975. It was a decade quick to begin and reluctant to end. Spanning the terminus are two Baudrillards. The first is younger and more conventionally leftist. He was fully embedded in the intellectual debates of the late 1960s. He was a Marxist, writing on labor and needs, use-value and production. Much of his efforts went into trying to correlate the legacy of the political economy of the 19th century into a more current society of the image and of rising commercialization and consumption. He was, in this sense, in step with theorists such as Julia Kristeva and the *Tel Quel* group of the late 1960s, or even the Situationist International, or Barthes and his critiques of consumer mythology. But after around April or May of 1974—as Barthes accompanied the *Tel Quel* editors in their voyages to China to witness firsthand the Maoist theory (*la pensée-maoïstique*) they had been espousing back home, only to become entirely disillusioned with this new fad of militancy—the entire progressive theoretical framework of the 1960s began to slip away. Suddenly the 1960s were irrelevant. The Situationist International disbanded in 1972. Philippe Sollers and Kristeva turned to theology, to the *nouveaux philosophes*, and in 1977 replaced their former pro-Maoist stance with a rather unexpected pro-Americanism.

But while much of French theory went to seed in the middle 1970s, Baudrillard came of age. Beginning with incidental pieces such as “Strike Story” (“*Conte de grève 3*”) in 1973 (Baudrillard, 2001a) and the books *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976) and *The Beaubourg Effect* (1977), and reaching full culmination with *Seduction* (1979), he developed a whole new theoretical vocabulary that was completely in tune with the historical transformation in the mid- to late 1970s into digitization, postindustrial economies, immaterial labor, mediation, and simulation. His theories of play and games are at the very heart of this transformation. By the end of the 1970s, the traditional Marxist concerns mostly go away. A new lexicon emerges that would define his career right through to his death in 2007. Rhetorically he begins to abandon traditional argumentation and the essay format. He evolves into a diaristic style of journalistic, *actualité* criticism. His interventions become shorter, often standardized to a 2- to 3-page chunk, or shorter even to the aphorisms of *Cool Memories*, which begin in 1980. An unusual arc, Baudrillard becomes more unconventional and uncompromising the older he gets. His early books are smart and critical, but they have a certain intellectual tameness to them, a kind of predictability within the French intellectual scene of that period. But his later writings are as unrelentingly original as any written in the last hundred years—so much so that Baudrillard became rather unfashionable on the Left in the 1980s and '90s, with chatter about how he had “gone off the deep end” or maybe even gone crazy. Perhaps he was a victim of his own radicality. Thus there are the two voices in Baudrillard, the early voice, which lasted less than 10 years, and the mature voice, which lasted about 30. For example, in 1969, he wrote the following emblematic passage on the sociological and dialectical foundations of modern technics: “All technical practice is social practice. All technical practice is immersed in the social

will. But it doesn't present itself as such: it alleges to have an autonomy, an innocence, a Technical Rationality founded on Science" (Baudrillard, 1969, p. 147). Run of the mill stuff, any progressive sociologist of the period could have written as much. But by 1976, he was already abandoning dialectics and writing instead on what would later be called the "fatal strategy":

It is impossible to destroy the system according to a logic of contradiction. . . . Everything produced by contradiction . . . only returns to the system and encourages it. . . . One can only respond to death with an equal or greater death. . . . The worst mistake, which all our revolutionary strategies are guilty of, is to believe that we can put an end to the system on the plane of the *real*. (Baudrillard, 2001a, pp. 335-336)

Now we are getting somewhere. Two voices, the new and the overdue. The young Baudrillard wrote on production, repression, and fetishism; the mature on seduction, destiny, and evil. The early was Marxist and sociological, and the late was Hegelian and metaphysical. First he was modern, but later . . . he was of another time.

What if Baudrillard were a gamer? Of course he was one already. The best that ever lived. He did not write much about play as a young author, only incidental pieces here and there, such as the excellent "Play and the Police" (1969). But after the late 1970s, play moved to the very center of his philosophical and critical project. In the end, the interesting claim to make is not that games are simulacra. It is precisely the opposite: Games are the real, emptied of all reality, existing in a permanent state of anticipation. The nongamic realm becomes pure death, always too early to count and never late enough to have taken place.

Does a eulogy end with perfection or with death?²¹

Choose the perfect event, our departed philosopher caught in the muddle of a subway strike:

These days on strike are a sweet utopia. We must walk and walk, finally deprived of the means of communication, finally deprived of all the amenities so that we can live without any quid pro quo. A second of subtraction, a second of perfection. . . . The image of an ideal society . . . what a dream! (Baudrillard, 2000a, p. 25)²²

Notes

1. Transvestites are a privileged category in this section. "They seem obsessed with sexual play, but it is in fact just play they are obsessed with. . . . They make sex into a game that is total, gestural, sensual, ritualistic—a sacred calling, but ironically so" (Baudrillard, 1979, p. 25).

2. In *De la séduction* he dismisses the "finality" criterion: "If play had some sort of finality, the only true player would be the trickster" (Baudrillard, 1979, p. 191). Baudrillard's critique of Kantian theories of play also comes earlier in his rather ingenious reading of Marx. Baudrillard's claim: In Marx, labor is always an ethic, whereas play is always an aesthetic. The former is the domain of the human, and the latter is the domain of nature or *physis*. He writes that

this beyond of political economy, that one might call play, non-work, or unalienated labor, is defined as the kingdom of a finality without end. It's in this sense that it is and will remain an *aesthetic*, in all the Kantian senses of the word. (Baudrillard, 2001a, pp. 137-138)

Lest anyone misunderstand his opinion on it, he goes on to call this concept of play "defective" and "bourgeois."

3. There is nevertheless a similar approach to "institutional critique," if we may call it that in this context, in Baudrillard (1979) through his distinction between rules and laws: "The magic of play . . . comes from this deliverance from the Law from within the arbitrariness of the Rule and ceremony. . . . In a way, men are more equal in ceremony than before the Law" (p. 187). Baudrillard references Caillois by name on page 196.

4. He makes a similar reference in his 1991 dialog with artist Enrico Baj (Baudrillard, 2001b). Likewise, for similar language on Caillois and the shift into vertiginous and chance games, see Baudrillard (1983, pp. 12, 96).

5. In *De la séduction* he writes of the "immorality" of play: "It is immoral because it substitute an order of seduction for an order of production" (Baudrillard, 1979, p. 196).

6. Later in the book he writes that "thought should play a catastrophic role, it should be itself an element of catastrophe or provocation within a world that seeks definitively to purify all, to exterminate death and negativity" (Baudrillard, 2000b, p. 107).

7. Earlier in the book, Baudrillard (1997b) also describes the grand division he sees between play and positivism via reference to sport and the controversies around doping in the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta:

Look at the handicapped athletes in Atlanta who mutilate themselves in order to improve their performances. This means that the individual is obligated to provoke artificially some sort of hardship that takes the place of destiny. In fact he booby-traps himself. The athlete no longer plays with anything. He tests, he experiments, and these things are the opposite of playing. (p. 91)

The words drip with profanity: "he tests," "he experiments." In Baudrillard, no practice is more loathsome than positivism, no profession more wicked.

8. Elsewhere he writes that his mode of critical thinking is "a game one plays with reality, just as seduction is a game one plays with desire (it puts it in play), just as metaphor is a game one plays with truth" (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 10-11).

9. Baudrillard is very close to Paul Virilio on this question; however, there is a terminological incongruence. Baudrillard's "accidents" are insignificant glitches easily managed and internalized by the system, whereas for Virilio, "accidents" indicate some sort of massive upheaval. Thus an "accident" in Virilio is much more like a "catastrophe" in Baudrillard.

10. In a sense, this is also Derrida's quarrel with Foucault's first book. See Derrida (1967).

11. The terms are from *De la séduction*: "Disenchanted simulation: porno—truer than the true—such is the ultimate simulacrum. Enchanted simulation: the *trompe-l'oeil*—falsier than the false—such is the secret of appearance" (Baudrillard, 1979, p. 86).

12. This is perhaps the most contested claim in what might be Baudrillard's most controversial book.

13. It may well be in our projects that we obviate the very object of our attention: "Psychoanalysis puts an end to the unconscious and desire, just as Marxism put an end to class struggle, in hypostatizing them and burying them in their theoretical enterprises" (Baudrillard, 1977, p. 16).

14. Heidegger and Baudrillard mix like oil and water; it is my own failing to invoke the older philosopher here. The notion of production illustrates well their incompatibility. In Baudrillard, production is *se produire*, to make something appear in what it is in reality. In a famous text from 1972, Baudrillard refers to this as "man's own power to bring forth the value of his labor ('*pro-du-cere*')" (Baudrillard, 2001a, p. 109). In 1979, he further defines the term: "*pro-duction* . . . The original meaning is not in fact that of fabrication but of making visible. It means to show and to make appear" (p. 54). But this same concept—to make something appear as it is—is known in Heidegger, as it was in the Greeks, as *aletheia* (ἀλήθεια), often translated in Heidegger as "revealing" or "unveiling" and translated in more popular contexts as

simply “truth.” Production is anathema to Baudrillard (his antidote to production is seduction). But in the work of Heidegger, revealing is arguably the single most important concept. Admittedly, a study is possible on whether what Baudrillard calls production is in fact “enframing” or possibly “falling” in Heidegger, but such a dissertation is better left for another day.

15. Baudrillard (1979) writes that phatic communication is “a desperate situation where mere contact seems like a marvel” (p. 223).

16. One of the central philosophical problems of its time, eliciting opinion from the likes of Gottfried Leibniz, Hermann von Helmholtz, Denis Diderot, and others, Molyneux’s question was originally posed in 1688 by William Molyneux to John Locke as a thought experiment on the nature of sense perception and cognition. The question is, If a man blind from birth, having already learned to distinguish spheres and cubes by touch, suddenly gains the faculty of sight, will this man be able to distinguish spheres from cubes by sight alone? Baudrillard’s admittedly small contribution to the debate comes in *Cool Memories IV*:

Congenitally blind people who have their sight ‘restored,’ or anyone recently operated on for cataracts, are often completely crippled, and can languish in dismay even to the point of suicide. . . . What would it be like for a human being who is suddenly given back his freedom?” (Baudrillard, 2000a, p. 147)

17. The “disappearance” buildup comes a few pages earlier: “In all circumstances, the difficulty is to be there and to not be there, simultaneously. How we are vis-à-vis the world is like this: we are there and we are not there” (Baudrillard, 2000a, p. 119).

18. Here he hints at an elusive “something” within us.

Something within us uncompiler into death, undoes, destroys, liquidates, and disjoins so that we are permitted to resist the pressure of the real and live. Something in the bottom of the whole system of production *resists the limitlessness of production*, without which we would all already be dead and buried. (Baudrillard, 1979, p. 56-57)

19. Theory, in the sense of philosophy and criticism, is a return to the void.

Theory has an immediate effect—a very material one as well—of being a void. . . . I don’t see how theory and reality can go together. . . . That’s what seduction is, in the good sense. Not a process of expansion and conquest, but the implosive process of the game. (Baudrillard, 1987a, pp. 128-129)

20. Of course any student of Baudrillard will know that pataphysics, not metaphysics, was his true métier.

21. The best eulogy to Baudrillard I have yet read is Lovink and Wark (2007).

22. Nevertheless, death is still a more “timely” event, and thus comes perfectly last even in spite of its own effacement. Final words of the thinker:

I always arrive on time. This kind of punctuality is akin to a meeting with death, when of course we are always exactly on time. Or rather it is death which will always be timely in the meeting. It’s not that death waits for us there. It’s just that when it will be there, we will be there too. (Baudrillard, 2000a, p. 116)

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