

Selected Writings
Second edition, revised and expanded

Edited and introduced by

Mark Poster

2001

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

Jean Baudrillard

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* *Le Système des objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), pp. 255–83.

* *La Société de consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), pp. 17–26, 93–123.

For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, trans. Charles Levin (St Louis: Telos Press, 1981, original publication, 1972), pp. 130–63.

The Mirror of Production, trans. Mark Poster (St Louis: Telos Press, 1975, original publication, 1973), pp. 21–51, 111–29.

* *L'Échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 19–29, and “Symbolic Exchange and Death,” trans. Charles Levin in *The Structural Allegory*, ed. John Fekete, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 11 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 54–73.

* *De la séduction* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1979), pp. 75–92, 107–15, 241–3.

Simulacra and Simulations, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983, original publication, 1981), pp. 1–13, 23–49.

*Designates new translation from the French, by Jacques Mourrain.

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* *Les Stratégies fatales* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1983), pp. 9–33, 259–73.

“The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media,” trans. Marie Maclean, *New Literary History*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Spring 1985), pp. 577–89.

Cool Memories, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1990) pp. 113–23.

The Gulf War Did Not Take Place, trans. Paul Patton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) pp. 23–8, 41–50.

The Illusion of the End, trans. Chris Turner (Cambridge: Polity and Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) pp. 14–27.

The Perfect Crime, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1996) pp. 94–105.

Paroxysm: Interviews with Philippe Petit, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1998) pp. 7–25.

Douglas Kellner kindly reviewed my selections and made valuable suggestions. His book, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (1989) has a good bibliography of works by and on Baudrillard. Helen Tartar, my editor at Stanford, initiated this project, took on some of the duties often done by the volume editor, and encouraged me through its completion.

*Designates new translation from the French, by Jacques Mourrain.

Notes on the Translation

Words that appear in English in Baudrillard's original text, a practice that becomes increasingly prevalent in his writings, have been noted as such. Baudrillard rarely provides full citations in his own notes. The editor and translators have attempted to complete the citation, but in some cases this has proven impossible. At times Baudrillard cites French translations of English or American works which are unavailable in the United States. At other times Baudrillard's quotations have not been located anywhere in the text he cites. [Trans.] indicates a translator's addition to the notes.

EDITOR'S NOTE

We have preserved the spelling and punctuation practices of the translations we have taken from elsewhere. Our own translations use American spelling and punctuation practices.

Introduction

Mark Poster

Baudrillard has developed a theory to make intelligible one of the fascinating and perplexing aspects of advanced industrial society: the proliferation of communications through the media. This new language practice differs from both face to face symbolic exchange and print. The new media employ the montage principle of film (unlike print) and time-space distancing¹ (unlike face to face conversation) to structure a unique linguistic reality. Baudrillard theorizes from the vantage point of the new media to argue that a new culture has emerged, one that is impervious to the old forms of resistance and impenetrable by theories rooted in traditional metaphysical assumptions. Culture is now dominated by simulations, Baudrillard contends, objects and discourses that have no firm origin, no referent, no ground or foundation. In this sense, what Walter Benjamin wrote about "the age of mechanical reproduction,"² Baudrillard applied to all reaches of everyday life.

Baudrillard began his writing with *The System of Objects* (1968) and *Consumer Society* (1970) as an effort to extend the Marxist critique of capitalism to areas that were beyond the scope of the theory of the mode of production. He gradually abandoned Marxism, a process that is traced in the pages of this volume, developing his position along lines that have affinities with poststructuralists like Foucault and Derrida. Baudrillard found that the productivist metaphor in Marxism was inappropriate for comprehending the status of commodities in the post-World War II era. Only a semiological model, he argues, can decipher the meaning structure of the modern commodity. But the commodity embodies a communication structure that is a departure from the traditional understanding of the sign. In a commodity the relation of word, image or meaning and referent is

broken and restructured so that its force is directed, not to the referent of use value or utility, but to desire.

Like the poststructuralists, Baudrillard rejects traditional assumptions about referentiality. As Lyotard put it, the metanarratives of the past have collapsed, creating a new theoretical situation in which the concept can no longer pretend to control or grasp its object.³ In Baudrillard's terms, "hyperreality" is the new linguistic condition of society, rendering impotent theories that still rely on materialist reductionism or rationalist referentiality. In these respects, Baudrillard's work is important to the reconstitution of critical theory, and, more generally, appeals to those who would attempt to grasp the strange mixture of fantasy and desire that is unique to late-twentieth-century and early-twenty-first-century culture.

The selections in this volume represent a cross section of Baudrillard's writings from 1968 to 1997 and are drawn mostly from his major books. Most of the selections have previously been translated but are reprinted here because they are out of print, inaccessible, or are necessary to present the full range of Baudrillard's works. In the first edition of *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (1988), my intention was to make Baudrillard's writings available to non-French readers and thus stimulate the critical reception of his work. That has certainly been accomplished by now. The purpose of the second edition is to provide new readers of Baudrillard with an overview of his thought. Since Baudrillard's position shifted in the course of his career, the selections are presented in chronological order. The following brief introduction to the trajectory of his thought, with indications of his relation to other currents of French and German intellectual movements, might assist the reader unfamiliar with this often difficult material.

In *The System of Objects* (1968) Baudrillard initiated a comprehensive rethinking of the thesis of consumer society from a neo-Marxist perspective, one that relied on both Freudian and Saussurean themes. He explores the possibility that consumption has become the chief basis of the social order and of its internal classifications. He argues that consumer objects constitute a classification system that codes behavior and groups. As such, consumer objects must be analyzed by use of linguistic categories rather than those of Marxian or liberal economics, Freudian or behaviorist psychology, anthropological or sociological theories of needs. Consumer objects have their effect in structuring behavior through a linguistic sign function. Advertising codes products through symbols that differentiate them from other products, thereby fitting the object into a series. The object has its effect when it is consumed by transferring its "meaning" to the

individual consumer. A potentially infinite play of signs is thus instituted which orders society while providing the individual with an illusory sense of freedom and self-determination. *The System of Objects* went beyond earlier discussions of consumer society by systematically imposing linguistic categories to reveal the force of the code.

In *Consumer Society* (1970) Baudrillard provided numerous concrete examples of his analysis of consumer objects as a code. He also undertook a critique of discussions of consumer society in the fields of economics and sociology. These disciplines were unable to capture the novelty of consumerism because economics was burdened by a doctrine of *homo economicus*, the free individual acting in the marketplace and sociology was hampered by a notion of individual taste and a determinist concept of society. Against these positions Baudrillard effectively shows that a semiological analysis reveals that consumer objects constitute a system of signs that differentiate the population. This system of signs cannot become intelligible if each sign is related to each object, but only through the play of difference between the signs. In some of the most remarkable pages he has written, he indicates how consumer objects are like hysterical symptoms; they are best understood not as a response to a specific need or problem but as a network of floating signifiers that are inexhaustible in their ability to incite desire. Still a Marxist, Baudrillard goes on to argue that the reproduction of the mode of production has become dependent upon the expansion of consumption, on the reproduction of the act of consumption, thus inaugurating a new epoch in the history of capitalism.

For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (1972) was a unique attempt to develop a radical theory of language as a supplement to Marxism. The title essay is a brilliant "deconstruction" of structuralism. In Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign, the signifier or word is distinguished from both the signified or mental image and the referent. Saussure then marvels at the arbitrariness of the signifier and shows how it is constituted by structural relations with other signifiers. Baudrillard reverses this strategy: Saussure's problem only arises because he has *separated* the elements of the sign in the first place, using the signified and the referent as "alibis." Political economy has a similar strategy: it separates the commodity into exchange value (price) and use value only then to have use value as the alibi for exchange value. Just as Marx exposed the strategy behind the theory of the commodity in political economy, Baudrillard does the same for the theory of the sign by undermining the formalism of the theory of the sign. He has thus prepared the way for a historical

analysis of the sign as the mode of signification within capitalism, a task accomplished in *The Mirror of Production* (1973). *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* goes further than Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, the *Tel Quel* group or Mikhail Bakhtin in opening the path to a social critique of language because it historicizes both the structural and the social aspects of the sign.

The Mirror of Production marks Baudrillard's parting of the ways with Marxism. Henceforth the critique of the political economy of the sign is presented not as a supplement to the critique of political economy, but as its successor, as the new basis for critical social theory. The book was written with a force and systematicity that was not equaled again by Baudrillard. Each of Marx's major positions (the concept of labor, the dialectic, the theory of the mode of production, the critique of capital) are in turn revealed as mirror images of capitalist society. Marxism emerges in Baudrillard's pages not as a radical critique of capitalism but as its highest form of justification or ideology. For example, the anthropology of capitalism is *homo economicus*; the anthropology of Marxism is man as self-producer. In both cases humanity is equated with labor. Marxism does not have enough conceptual distance from political economy, Baudrillard contends, to serve as its theoretical gravedigger.

Baudrillard does not rest with a critique of Marxism: he goes on to develop what is perhaps the pinnacle of his early writings, i.e., a historical theory of sign structures. The weakness of Saussure's structural linguistics and Barthes's semiology was their ahistoricity, the formalism of their categories. Baudrillard remedies this deficiency by outlining the structural stages of the formation of contemporary language usage. He argues, somewhat nostalgically, that pre-industrial societies maintained a "symbolic" structure to communications: signs included words that were attached to referents and were uttered in a context that held open their possible reversal by others. During the Renaissance language began to lose its reciprocity when an abstract code, analogous to money, slowly transformed them.⁴ Hence the era of the sign emerged. Baudrillard now theorizes capitalism as a reflection of this change at the level of the economy, a subordinate aspect of the history of modes of signification. In the late twentieth century, signs become completely separated from their referents, resulting in a structure that resembles the signal: signifiers act like traffic lights, emitting meanings to which there is no linguistic response. The composite organization of such signifiers is termed the code by Baudrillard, a concept which he never adequately defines. The code operates by extracting signifieds from the social, redeploying them in the media as "floating signifiers." TV ads especially but not exclusively constitute

a new language form in which the code transmits signifiers to the population who are subject to this "terrorist" mode of signification.

Symbolic Exchange and Death (1976) draws out the pessimistic implications of the theory of the code, marking a change in Baudrillard's political stance.⁵ As the politics of the 1960s receded so did Baudrillard's radicalism: from a position of firm leftism he gradually moved to one of bleak fatalism. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* he searches desperately for a source of radicalism that challenges the absorptive capacities of a system with no fixed determinations, a world where anything can be anything else, where everything is both equivalent to and indifferent to everything else, a society, in short, dominated by the digital logic of the code. Baudrillard's morose conclusion is that only death escapes the code, only death is an act without an equivalent return, an exchange of values. Death signifies the reversibility of signs in the gift, a truly symbolic act that defies the world of simulacra, models and codes.⁶

Symbolic Exchange and Death is flawed by the totalizing quality of Baudrillard's writing. Still, the value of the book lies in the refinements it provides of many of the themes of Baudrillard's earlier works. In it Baudrillard grapples, as nowhere before, with the problem of characterizing the structure of communication in a world dominated by the media. This important issue, too much neglected by critical theory, becomes the mainstay of his writing after 1976. Although Baudrillard treats this theme with hyperbole and vague formulations, he has initiated a line of thought that is fundamental to a reconstitution of critical theory. While this project is somewhat akin to the recent work of Jürgen Habermas, Baudrillard wrestles with the communication structure of the media, whereas his German counterpart pursues the quixotic end of defining the "ideal speech situation," a theoretical task that is grounded in the metaphysics of the Enlightenment and is unlikely to prove fruitful for a critical theory of contemporary society.⁷

In *On Seduction* (1979) Baudrillard makes a turn toward a post-structuralist critique of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Theories that deny the surface "appearance" of things in favor of a hidden structure or essence, theories like Marxism, psychoanalysis, and structuralism, come under renewed attack. These interpretive strategies all privilege forms of rationality. Against them Baudrillard celebrates the Nietzschean critique of the "truth" and favors a model based on what he calls "seduction." Seduction plays on the surface thereby challenging theories that "go beyond" the manifest to the latent. Although *On Seduction* elicited a barrage of criticism by feminist theorists (Jane Gallop, Luce Irigaray, and others) for its seeming

masculinist and heterosexist formulations, Victoria Grace defends Baudrillard's book on feminist grounds by pointing to his model of symbolic exchange as a basis for a nonessentialist feminism.⁸ The model of seduction also prefigures Baudrillard's later term, the hyperreal, with all of its postmodernist implications. At the close of the book, Baudrillard tentatively suggests that seduction might be a mode to replace the model of production.

In *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981) Baudrillard extends, some would say hyperbolically extends, his theory of commodity culture. No longer does the code take priority over, or even precede, the consumer object. The distinctions between object and representation, thing and idea are no longer valid. In their place Baudrillard fathoms a strange new world constructed out of models or simulacra which have no referent or ground in any "reality" except their own. Simulations are different from fictions or lies in that the former not only present an absence as a presence, the imaginary as the real. They also undermine any contrast to the real, absorbing the real within itself. Instead of a "real" economy of commodities that is somehow bypassed by an "unreal" myriad of advertising images, Baudrillard now discerns only a hyperreality, a world of self-referential signs. He has moved from the TV ad which, however, never completely erases the commodity it solicits, to the TV newscast which creates the news if only to be able to narrate it, or the soap opera whose daily events are both referent and reality for many viewers.

If Baudrillard's argument of hyperreality has a modicum of validity, the position of the New Critics and deconstructionists must be taken seriously. The self-referentiality of language, which they promote against materialists, phenomenologists, realists, and historicists as the key to textual analysis, now, in Baudrillard's hands, becomes the first principle of social existence in the era of high-tech capitalism. Critical theory faces the formidable task of unveiling structures of domination when no one is dominating, nothing is being dominated and no ground exists for a principle of liberation from domination. If Auschwitz is the sign of total tyranny and the industrial production of death, the world of "hyperreality" bypasses the distinction between death and life.⁹

The pessimistic implications of *Simulacra and Simulations* are brought home in *Fatal Strategies* (1983). Here Baudrillard attempts to think the social world from the point of view of the object, a seeming oxymoron. Like the poststructuralists, Baudrillard assumes that the era of the representational subject is past. One can no longer comprehend the world as if the Kantian categories of time, space, causality, etc. are necessary, universal paths to truth. Baudrillard takes

this to imply that the subject no longer provides a vantage point on reality. The privileged position has shifted to the object, specifically to the hyperreal object, the simulated object. In place of a logic of the subject, Baudrillard proposes a logic of the object, and this is his "fatal strategy." As the reader will discover, the world unveiled by Baudrillard, the world from within the object, looks remarkably like the world as seen from the position of postmodernists.¹⁰

Baudrillard is not disputing the trivial issue that reason remains operative in some actions, that if I want to arrive at the next block, for example, I can assume a Newtonian universe (common sense), plan a course of action (to walk straight for x meters), carry out the action, and finally fulfill my goal by arriving at the point in question. What is in doubt is that this sort of thinking enables a historically informed grasp of the present in general. According to Baudrillard, it does not. The concurrent spread of the hyperreal through the media and the collapse of liberal and Marxist politics as master narratives, deprives the rational subject of its privileged access to truth. In an important sense individuals are no longer citizens, eager to maximize their civil rights, nor proletarians, anticipating the onset of communism. They are rather consumers, and hence the prey of objects as defined by the code. In this sense, only the "fatal strategy" of the point of view of the object provides any understanding of the present situation.

In a more recent essay "The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media" (1985), Baudrillard recapitulates the theme of his work in the 1980s: the media generate a world of simulations which is immune to rationalist critique, be it Marxist or liberal. The media present an excess of information and they do so in a manner that precludes response by the recipient. This simulated reality has no referent, no ground, no source. It operates outside the logic of representation. But the masses have found a way of subverting it: the strategy of silence or passivity.¹¹ Baudrillard thinks that by absorbing the simulations of the media, by failing to respond, the masses undermine the code.¹² Whatever the value of this position, it represents a new way of understanding the impact of the media. Instead of complaining about the alienation of the media or the terrorism of the code, Baudrillard proposes a way out: silence. Critical theorists will certainly not remain silent about Baudrillard's paradoxical revolutionary strategy. In fact, more suggestive approaches to the question of resistance have been offered by Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau in France and cultural studies theorists in the English-speaking world. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), for example, de Certeau argues that the masses resignify meanings that are presented to them in the media, in consumer objects, in the layout of city streets.¹³ To

many, de Certeau's position on resistance seems more heuristic and more sensible than Baudrillard's.

Baudrillard's writing up to the mid-1980s is open to several criticisms. He fails to define his major terms, such as the code; his writing style is hyperbolic and declarative, often lacking sustained, systematic analysis when it is appropriate; he totalizes his insights, refusing to qualify or delimit his claims. He writes about particular experiences, television images, as if nothing else in society mattered, extrapolating a bleak view of the world from that limited base. He ignores contradictory evidence such as the many benefits afforded by the new media, for example, by providing vital information to the populace (as in the Vietnam War) and counteracting parochialism with humanizing images of foreigners. The instant, worldwide availability of information has changed the human society forever, probably for the good.

Nevertheless Baudrillard's work is an invaluable beginning for the comprehension of the impact of new communication forms on society. He has introduced a language-based analysis of new kinds of social experience, experience that is sure to become increasingly characteristic of advanced societies. His work shatters the existing foundations for critical social theory, showing how the privilege they give to labor and their rationalist epistemologies are inadequate for the analysis of the media and other new social activities. In these regards he joins with Derrida's critique of logocentrism and Foucault's critique of the human sciences. Unlike these poststructuralist thinkers, Baudrillard fails to reflect on the epistemological novelties he introduces, rendering his work open to the changes outlined above. For the critical theorist, Baudrillard represents the beginning of a line of thought, one that is open to development and refinement by others.

In the 1990s Baudrillard's important concept of simulation becomes entwined with another category, that of the virtual. If simulation captures the culture of television, the virtual points to a further imbrication of the human with information machines, that is, the Internet. The selections added to the second edition of this volume explore this theme.

Before turning to the question of the virtual, another, more autobiographical side of Baudrillard's more recent writing requires some attention. In 1987 Baudrillard published the first volume of *Cool Memories*, offering reflections on his life from 1980 to 1985. Since then he has added two more volumes covering the years until 1995. In 1987 another small book appeared by him, *L'autre par lui-même*, sarcastically subtitled "Habilitation," which also put his life and work into review. The volumes of *Cool Memories* are written in aphoristic style, reminiscent of Nietzsche's writing and of Theodor Adorno's

Minima Moralia (1974).¹⁴ The selection included here gives the reader a sense of this unusual aspect of Baudrillard's work.

Baudrillard's writing begins to be sprinkled with the term "virtual" and "virtual reality" as early as 1991. But he uses these terms interchangeably with "simulation," and without designating anything different from the earlier usage. Concerning the Gulf War of 1991, for example, he writes in his controversial book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995): "In our fear of the real, of anything that is too real, we have created a gigantic simulator. We prefer the virtual to the catastrophe of the real, of which television is the universal mirror."¹⁵ The virtual is equivalent to the hyperreal or to simulation. In all cases the electronically mediated communication stands in a double relation to "reality." Mediated communication both reflects reality by first delivering signals from a sender to a receiver that are somehow about it; and, second, it substitutes for reality in the sense that it never simply represents reality but puts forth its own reality. Simulations and the virtual, for Baudrillard, are different from reality but always stand in a certain relation to it.

In *The Illusion of the End* (1994) Baudrillard continues to question the validity of humanist perspectives in an age of the hyperreal. A telos or an end, both in the sense of a purpose and a terminus, no longer, he charges, orient the contemporary traveler. Metanarratives that provide coherence for the individual and disciplines like history which fix societies firmly in a temporal continuum have lost their verisimilitude. In the selection included in this volume, Baudrillard indicates how events, the building blocks of historicizing narratives, have lost their ground in the culture of simulation. *The Illusion of the End* is the centerpiece of Baudrillard's writing on the new millennium, a theme to which he returns several times to show how a chronology of new beginnings and final apocalypses provides only a sham alibi for cultural exposition.

With *The Perfect Crime* (1996), Baudrillard begins to reflect upon the role of his own thought in relation to the culture he has so relentlessly dissected. To paraphrase Marx speaking of communism as the solution to the riddle of history, Baudrillard has become virtual and knows himself to be such: he argues that his critical theory of simulation has become nothing less than the principle of reality.¹⁶ The world has become virtual; Baudrillard's theory is no longer true, but real. What use then for Baudrillard's writings in the age of virtual reality machines? He explains:

The idea of simulacrum was a conceptual weapon against reality, but it has been stolen. Not that it has been pillaged, vulgarized, or has

become commonplace (which is true but has no consequence), but because simulacra have been absorbed by reality which has swallowed them and which, from now on, is clad with all the rhetoric of simulation. And to cap it all, simulacra have become reality! Today, simulacra guarantee the continuation of the real. The simulacrum now hides, not the truth, but the fact that there is none, that is to say, the continuation of Nothingness.¹⁷

Since simulation is now the dominant form of culture, Baudrillard's concept of simulation, he thinks, no longer functions as a concept. Somewhat immodestly he suggests that "theory [his own] that realizes itself is no longer a theory."¹⁸ Eschewing critical theory, he now proposed "radical thought" as an alternative. If nothing else, the notion of radical thought refutes those who find nothing but bleakness in his writing. Baudrillard's engagement with the present emerges as vital and committed.

In the interviews collected as *Paroxysm* (1998), Baudrillard reviews his work of the 1990s, reflecting upon new concerns with globalization and technology. New media in particular draw his attention. He explores the Internet, communications satellites, cryogenics, biotechnology, nanotechnology, robotics, and other phenomena that appear to him to intensify the culture of the hyperreal that he exposed long ago. In his Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California, Irvine, in 1999, he addressed the question of reproductive technologies in relation to the problem of the virtual, confirming his attentiveness to the issue of gender.¹⁹ The selection from *Paroxysm* included here also finds him renewing his critique of history and temporal orientation from *The Illusion of the End*.

NOTES

- 1 Anthony Giddens has developed this concept especially in *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984).
- 2 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) pp. 217–52.
- 3 Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) p. xxiv.
- 4 This idea is developed further by Jean-Joseph Goux in *Économie et symbolique* (Paris: Seuil, 1973) and later by Marc Shell in *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978).

- 5 See the interview with Baudrillard by Maria Shevtsova, "Intellectuals [sic] Commitment and Political Power," in *Thesis Eleven* (1984–5) nos 10–11, pp. 166–75. Baudrillard presents his current views on politics. Also interesting in this regard is Robert Maniquis, "Une Conversation avec Jean Baudrillard," *UCLA French Studies* (1984–5) vols. 2–3, pp. 1–22.
- 6 It might be noted that Baudrillard defends the notion of the symbolic against psychological theories. See his critique of psychoanalysis in "Beyond the Unconscious: the Symbolic," *Discourse* (1981) vol. 3, pp. 60–87.
- 7 See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume 1, Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon and Cambridge: Polity, 1984), originally published in 1981.
- 8 Victoria Grace, *Baudrillard's Challenge: A Feminist Reading* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
- 9 See Baudrillard, "Fatality or Reversible Imminence: Beyond the Uncertainty Principle," *Social Research* (Summer, 1982) vol. 49, no. 2, pp. 272–93 for a discussion of the chance/necessity distinction in relation to the world of hyperreality.
- 10 See Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), especially the brilliant piece by Fredric Jameson. It might be noted that Baudrillard himself is a contributor to this collection.
- 11 See also Jean Baudrillard, *L'ombre des majorités silencieuses ...* (Paris: Utopie, 1978), available in English as *In the Shadow of the Silent Majority* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).
- 12 See Baudrillard's essays "What Are You Doing After the Orgy?," *Artforum* (October, 1983) pp. 42–6; "Astral America," *Artforum* (September, 1984) pp. 70–4, and *L'Amérique* (Paris: Grasset, 1985) for descriptions of life in the new world of the media, especially in the United States where the tendencies Baudrillard discusses are most advanced.
- 13 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). See also, Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: de Minuit, 1979) or in the English translation by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).
- 14 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974).
- 15 Jean Baudrillard, "The Reality Gulf," *The Guardian* (January 11, 1991) p. 25. See also the discussion of Baudrillard's political analysis in James Der Derian, "Simulation: The Highest Stage of Capitalism?," in Douglas Kellner, ed., *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) pp. 189–208.
- 16 This Hegelian gesture of identifying one's thought with reality is also made by Derrida, albeit more modestly, when he reports that, on a trip

to Moscow, his then Soviet hosts defined Perestroika as deconstruction: "...a Soviet colleague said to me, scarcely laughing, 'But deconstruction, that's the USSR today.'" Jacques Derrida, "Back from Moscow, in the USSR," in Mark Poster, ed., *Politics, Theory and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) p. 222. Derrida relates this incident anew in *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) p. 89. One is tempted to make a comment about the role of intellectuals in the age of mass media as a condition for this new insistence on the inscription of theory in history.

- 17 Jean Baudrillard, *Le Crime parfait* (Paris: Galilée, 1995) p. 146. This translation by François Debrix appeared in "Radical Thought," *Ctheory*, (April 19, 1995) vol. 18, pp. 1-2 and is taken from a pamphlet Baudrillard published as *La Pensée radicale* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 1994) which appears in revised form in *Le Crime parfait*. It has been published in print as "Radical Thought," trans. David Macey and Mike Gane in *Parallax* (September 1995) vol. 1, pp. 53-62.
- 18 "Radical Thought," p. 19.
- 19 These lectures will be published as *The Vital Illusion* by Columbia University Press in January 2001.

1

The System of Objects

Garap

If we consume the product as product, we consume its meaning through advertising. Let us imagine for the moment modern cities stripped of all their signs, with walls bare like a guiltless conscience [*conscience vide*]. And then GARAP appears. This single expression, GARAP, is inscribed on all the walls: pure signifier, without a signified, signifying itself. It is read, discussed, and interpreted to no end. Signified despite itself, it is consumed as sign. Then what does it signify, if not a society capable of generating such a sign? And yet despite its lack of significance it has mobilized a complete imaginary collectivity; it has become characteristic of the (w)hole of society. To some extent, people have come to "believe" in GARAP. We have seen in it the sign (*indice*) of the omnipotence of advertising. And one might think that it would suffice to associate the sign GARAP with a product for it to impose itself immediately. Yet, nothing is less certain, and the trick of advertisers has been, in effect, to conceal this, since individual resistances could express themselves on an explicit signified. Whereas consensus, even when ironic, establishes itself on faith in a pure sign. All of a sudden, the real signified of advertising appears in all its purity. Advertising, like GARAP, is mass society, which, with the aid of an arbitrary and systematic sign, induces receptivity, mobilizes consciousness, and reconstitutes itself in the very process as the collective.¹ Through advertising mass society and consumer society continuously ratify themselves.²

A new humanism?

Serial conditioning

In the themes of competition and "personalization" we are better able to see the underlying system of conditioning at work. In fact, the ideology of competition, which under the sign of "freedom" was previously the golden rule of production, has now been transferred entirely to the domain of consumption. Thousands of marginal differences and an often formal differentiation of a single product through conditioning have, at all levels, intensified competition and created an enormous range of precarious freedoms. The latest such freedom is the random selection of objects that will distinguish any individual from others.³ In fact, one would think that the ideology of competition is here dedicated to the same process, and consequently to the same end, as it is in the field of production. If we can still view consumption as an independent activity (*profession libérale*), allowing the expression of personal preferences, while on the contrary production appears to be quite definitively planned, this is simply because the techniques of psychological conditioning (*planification*) are not as developed as those of economic planning.

We still want what others do not have. We are still at the competitive and heroic stage of product selection and use, at least in Western European societies (in the East the problem is deferred) where the systematic replacement and cyclical synchronization of models has not yet been established as it has in the United States.⁴ Psychological resistance? The force of tradition? More simply, the majority of people are still far from achieving the economic status where only one repertoire of models would be available as all commodities would comply with the same maximum standard; where diversity would matter less than possessing the "latest" model – the imperative fetish of social valorization. In the United States 90 per cent of the population experience no other desire than to possess what others possess. From year to year, consumer choices are focused *en masse* on the latest model which is uniformly the best. A fixed class of "normal" consumers has been created that coincides with the whole population. If we have not yet reached this stage in Europe, we can already clearly detect, according to the irreversible trend towards the American model, the ambiguity of advertising: it *provokes us to compete*; yet, through this imaginary competition, it *already invokes a profound monotony*, a uniformity (*postulation uniforme*), a devolution in the

bliss of the consuming masses.⁵ Advertising tells us, at the same time: "Buy this, for it is like nothing else!" ("The meat of the elite, the cigarette of the *happy few*!"⁶ etc.); but also: "Buy this because everyone else is using it!"⁷ And this is in no way contradictory. We can imagine that each individual feels unique while resembling everyone else: all we need is a schema of collective and mythological projection – a model.⁸

Hence, one could think that the ultimate goal of consumer society (not through any technocratic Machiavellianism, but through the ordinary structural play of competition) is the functionalization of the consumer and the psychological monopolization of all needs – a unanimity in consumption which at last would harmoniously conform to the complete consolidation and control of production.

Freedom by default

Everywhere today, in fact, the ideology of competition gives way to a "philosophy" of self-fulfillment. In a more integrated society individuals no longer compete for the possession of goods, they actualize themselves in consumption, each on his own. The leitmotiv is no longer one of selective competition, it is personalization for all. At the same time, advertising has changed from a commercial practice to a theory of the praxis of consumption, a theory that crowns the whole edifice of society. We find this illustrated by American advertisers (Dichter, Martineau, etc.)⁹ The reasoning is simple:

- 1 Consumer society (objects, products, advertising), for the first time in history, offers the individual the opportunity for total fulfillment and liberation;
- 2 The system of consumption constitutes an authentic language, a new culture, when pure and simple consumption is transformed into a means of individual and collective expression. Thus, a "new humanism" of consumption is opposed to the "nihilism" of consumption.

The first issue: self-fulfillment. Dr Dichter, director of the Institute for Motivational Research, defines at once the problematics of this new man:

We are now confronted with the problem of permitting the average American to feel moral even as he flirts, even when he spends, or when he buys a second or third car. One of the fundamental problems of

prosperity is to sanction and to justify its enjoyment, to convince people that making their life enjoyable is moral, and not immoral. One of the fundamental tasks of all advertising, and of every project destined to promote sales, should be to permit the consumer freely to enjoy life and confirm his right to surround himself with products that enrich his existence and make him happy.¹⁰

Hence, through planned (*dirigée*) motivation we find ourselves in an era where advertising takes over the moral responsibility for all of society and replaces a puritan morality with a hedonistic morality of pure satisfaction, like a new state of nature at the heart of hypercivilization. Dichter's last sentence is ambiguous, however. Is the goal of advertising to liberate man's resistance to happiness or to promote sales? Do advertisers wish to reorganize society in relation to satisfaction, or in relation to profit? "No," answers Bleustein-Blanchet (Preface to Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*), "motivation research does not threaten the freedom of individuals and in no way impinges on the individual's right to be rational or irrational."¹¹ There is too much honesty in these words, or perhaps too much cunning. Dichter is more clear. What we have are *conceded* freedoms: "To permit the consumer..." we must allow men to be children without being ashamed of it. "Free to be oneself" in fact means: free to project one's desires onto produced goods. "Free to enjoy life" means: free to regress and be irrational, and thus adapt to a certain social organization of production.¹² This sales "philosophy" is in no way encumbered by paradox. It advertises a rational goal (to enlighten people about their wants) and scientific methods, in order to promote irrational behavior in man (to accept being only a complex of immediate drives and to be satisfied with their satisfaction). Even drives are dangerous however, and the neo-sorcerers of consumption are careful not to liberate people in accordance with some explosive end state of happiness. They only offer the resolution of tensions, that is to say, a freedom by default: "Every time a tension differential is created, which leads to frustration and action, we can expect a product to overcome this tension by responding to the aspirations of the group. Then the product has a chance of success."¹³ The goal is to allow the drives that were previously blocked by mental determinants (*instances*) (taboo, superego, guilt) to crystallize on objects, concrete determinants where the explosive force of desire is annulled and the ritual repressive function of social organization is materialized. The freedom of existence that pits the individual against society is dangerous. But the freedom to possess is harmless, since it enters the game without knowing it. As Dr Dichter claims, this freedom is a moral

one. It is even the ultimate in morality, since the consumer is simultaneously reconciled with himself and with the group. He becomes the perfect social being. Traditional morality only required that the individual conform to the group; advertising "philosophy" requires that they now conform to themselves, and that they resolve their own conflicts. In this way it invests him morally as never before. Taboos, anxieties, and neuroses, which made the individual a deviant and an outlaw, are lifted at the cost of a regression in the security of objects, thus reinforcing the images of the Father and the Mother. The irrationality of drives increasingly more "free" at the base will go hand in hand with control increasingly more restricted at the top.

A new language?

A second issue: does the object/advertising system form a language? The idealist-consumerist philosophy is based on the substitution of lived and conflictual human relations with "personalized" relations to objects. According to Pierre Martineau, "Any buying process is an interaction between the personality of the individual and the so-called 'personality' of the product itself."¹⁴ We make believe that products are so differentiated and multiplied that they have become complex beings, and consequently purchasing and consumption must have the same value as any *human* relation.¹⁵ But precisely: is there an active syntax? Do objects instruct needs and structure them in a new way? Conversely, do needs instruct new social structures through the mediation of objects and their production? If this is the case, we can speak of a language. Otherwise, this is nothing more than a manager's cunning idealism.

Structure and demarcation: the brand

The act of buying is neither a lived nor a free form of exchange. It is a preconditioned activity where two irreducible systems confront each other. At the level of the individual, with his or her needs, conflicts, and negativity, the system is fluid and disconnected. At the level of products, in all of their positivity, the system is codified, classified, discontinuous, and relatively integrated. This is not interaction but rather the forced integration of the system of needs within the system of products. Of course, together they constitute a system of signification, and not merely one of satisfaction. But a syntax is necessary for

there to be "language": the objects of mass consumption merely form a repertoire. Let me explain.

At the stage of artisanal production objects reflect the contingent and singular character of needs. While the two systems are adapted to one another they are no better integrated since they depend on the relative coherence of needs, which are fluid and contingent: there is no objective technological (*technique*) progress. Since the beginning of the industrial era, manufactured goods have acquired coherence from technological organization (*l'ordre technique*) and from the economic structure. The system of needs has become less integrated than the system of objects; the latter imposes its own coherence and thus acquires the capacity to fashion an entire society.¹⁶ We could add that "the machine has replaced the unlimited series of variables (objects 'made to measure' in accordance with needs) with a limited number of constants."¹⁷ Certainly we can identify the premises of a language in this transformation: internal structuration, simplification, transition to the limited and discontinuous, constitution of *technemes* and the increasing convergence of these *technemes*. If the artisanal object is at the level of speech (*parole*), industrial technology institutes a set of expressions (*langue*). But a set of expressions (*langue*) is not language (*langage*):¹⁸ it is not the concrete structure of the automobile engine that is expressed but rather the form, color, shape, the accessories, and the "social standing" of the object. Here we have the tower of Babel: each item speaks its own idiom. Yet at the same time, through calculated differences and combinatorial variations, serial production demarcates significations, establishes a repertoire and creates a lexicon of forms and colors in which recurrent modalities of "speech" can be expressed: nevertheless, is this language? This immense paradigm lacks a true syntax. It neither has the rigorous syntax of the technological level, nor the loose syntax of needs: floating from one to the other like an extensive repertoire, reduced, at the level of the quotidian, to an immense combinatorial matrix of types and models, where incoherent needs are distributed (*ventiler*) without any reciprocal structuration occurring. Needs disappear into products which have a greater degree of coherence. Parceled out and discontinuous, needs are inserted arbitrarily and with difficulty into a matrix of objects. Actually, the world of objects is overwhelmed by the absolute contingency of the system of individual needs. But this contingency is in some way indexed, classified, and demarcated by objects: it can therefore be directed (and this is the system's real objective on the socioeconomic level).

If the industrial technological order is capable of shaping our society it is, in a way that is contradictory, a function of society's

coherence and incoherence: through its structural (technological) coherence "at the top;" and through the astructural (yet directed) incoherence of the process of product commercialization and the satisfaction of needs "at the base." We can see that language, because it is actually neither consumed nor possessed by those who speak it, still maintains the possibility of the "essential" and of a syntax of exchange (the structuration of communication). The object/advertising system, however, is overwhelmed by the "inessential" and by a destructured world of needs; it is content to satisfy those needs in their detail, without ever establishing any new structures of collective exchange.

Martineau adds: "There is no simple relationship between kinds of buyers and kinds of cars, however. Any human is a complex of many motives... which may vary in countless combinations. Nevertheless the different makes and models are seen as helping people give expression to their own personality dimensions."¹⁹ He goes on to illustrate this "personalization" with a few examples.

The conservative, in choosing and using a car, wishes to convey such ideas as dignity, reserve, maturity, seriousness... Another definite series of automotive personalities is selected by the people wanting to make known their middle-of-the-road moderation, their being fashionable... Further along the range of personalities are the innovators and the ultramoderns...²⁰

No doubt Martineau is right: it is in this way that people define themselves in relation to objects. But this also shows that it is not a language, but rather a gamut of distinguishing criteria more or less arbitrarily indexed on a gamut of stereotyped personalities. It is as if the differential system of consumption significantly helped to distinguish:

- 1 Within the consumer, categories of needs which now have but a distant relation with the person as a lived being;
- 2 Within society, categories or "status groups," recognizable in a specific collection of objects. The hierarchized gamuts of objects and products play exactly the same role as the set of distinguishing values played in previous times: the foundation of group morality.

On both levels, there is solicitation, coerced grouping and categorization of the social and personal world based on objects, developing into a hierarchal repertoire without syntax; that is, into a *system of classification, and not a language*. It is as if, through the demarcation

of the social, and not by a dialectic, an imposed order was created, and through this order, for each group, a kind of objective future (materialized in objects): in short, a grid in which relations become rather impoverished. The euphoric and wily "motivation" philosophers would like to persuade themselves and others that the reign of the object is still the shortest path to freedom. They offer as proof the spectacular mélange of needs and satisfactions, the abundance of choice, and the festival of supply and demand whose effervescence can provide the illusion of culture. But let us not be fooled: objects are *categories of objects* which quite tyrannically induce *categories of persons*. They undertake the policing of social meanings, and the significations they engender are controlled. Their proliferation, simultaneously arbitrary and coherent, is the best vehicle for a social order, equally arbitrary and coherent, to materialize itself effectively under the sign of affluence.

The concept of "brand," the principal concept of advertising, summarizes well the possibilities of a "language" of consumption. All products (except perishable foods) are offered today as a specific acronym: each product "worthy of the name" has a brand name (which at times is substituted for the thing itself: Frigidaire or Xerox). The function of the brand name is to signal the product; its secondary function is to mobilize connotations of affect:

Actually, in our highly competitive system, few products are able to maintain any technical superiority for long. They must be invested with overtones to individualize them; they must be endowed with richness of associations and imagery; they must have many levels of meaning, if we expect them to be top sellers, if we hope that they will achieve the emotional attachment which shows up as brand loyalty.²¹

The psychological restructuring of the consumer is performed through a single word – Philips, Olida, General Motors – a word capable of summing up both the diversity of objects and a host of diffuse meanings. Words of synthesis summarizing a synthesis of affects: that is the miracle of the "psychological label." In effect this is the only language in which the object speaks to us, the only one it has invented. Yet, this basic lexicon, which covers walls and haunts consciences, is strictly asyntactic: diverse brands follow one another, are juxtaposed and substituted for one another without an articulation or transition. It is an erratic lexicon where one brand devours the other, each living for its own endless repetition. This is undoubtedly the most impoverished of languages: full of signification and empty of meaning. It is a language of signals. And the "loyalty" to a brand

name is nothing more than the conditioned reflex of a controlled affect.

But is it not a beneficial thing, our philosophers object, to tap into deep motives (*forces profondes*) (in order to reintegrate them within the impoverished system of labels)? Liberate yourself from censorship! Overcome your superego! Take courage in your desires! Yet, are we actually tapping into these deep motives in order to articulate them in language? Does this system of signification give meaning to presently hidden aspects of the individual, and if so, to which meanings? Let us listen once again to Martineau:

Naturally it is better to use acceptable, stereotyped terms... This is the very essence of metaphor... If I ask for a "mild" cigarette or a "beautiful" car, while I can't define these attributes literally, I still know that they indicate something desirable... The average motorist isn't sure at all what "octane" in gasoline actually is... But he does know vaguely that it is something good. So he orders "high-octane" gasoline, because he desires this essential quality behind the meaningless surface jargon.²²

In other words, the discourse of advertising only arouses desire in order to generalize it in the most vague terms. "Deep motives," rephrased in their simplest expression, are indexed on an institutionalized code of connotations. And in fact, "choice" only confirms the collusion between this *moral* order and my most profound whims (*velleités*): this is the alchemy of the "psychological label."

The stereotyped evocation of "deep motives" is simply equivalent to *censorship*. The ideology of personal fulfillment, the triumphant illogicality of drives cleansed of guilt (*deculpabilisées*), is nothing more than a tremendous endeavor to materialize the superego. *It is a censor, first of all, that is "personalized" in the object.* The philosophers of consumption may well speak of "deep motives" as the immediate possibilities of happiness which need only be liberated. But the unconscious is conflictual and, in so far as advertising mobilizes it, it is mobilized as conflict. Advertising does not liberate drives. Primarily, it mobilizes phantasms which block these drives. Hence, the ambiguity of the object, in which individuals never have the opportunity to surpass themselves, but can only re-collect themselves in contradiction, in their desires and in the forces that censor their desires. We have here a general schema of gratification/frustration:²³ under the formal resolution of tensions and an incomplete regression, the object serves as a vehicle for the perpetual rechanneling of conflicts. This could possibly be a definition of the specific form of

contemporary alienation: in the process of consumption internal conflicts or "deep drives" are mobilized and alienated in the same way as labor power is in the process of production.

Nothing has changed, or rather it has: restrictions in personal fulfillment no longer manifest themselves through repressive laws, or norms of obedience. Censorship operates through "unconstrained" behaviors (purchasing, choice consumption), and through spontaneous investment. In a way, it is internalized in pleasure (*jouissance*).

A universal code: social standing

The object/advertising system constitutes a system of signification but not language, for it lacks an active syntax: it has the simplicity and effectiveness of a code. It does not structure the personality; it designates and classifies it. It does not structure social relations: it demarcates them in a hierarchical repertoire. It is formalized in a universal system of recognition of social statuses: a code of "social standing."

Within "consumer society," the notion of status, as the criterion which defines social being, tends increasingly to simplify and to coincide with the notion of "social standing." Yet "social standing" is also measured in relation to power, authority, and responsibility. But in fact: There is no real responsibility without a Rolex watch! Advertising refers explicitly to the object as a necessary criterion: You will be judged on... An elegant woman is recognized by... etc. Undoubtedly objects have always constituted a system of recognition (*repérage*), but in conjunction with, and often in addition to, other systems (gestural, ritual, ceremonial, language, birth status, code of moral values, etc.). What is specific to our society is that other systems of recognition (*reconnaissance*) are progressively withdrawing, primarily to the advantage of the code of "social standing." Obviously this code is more or less determinant given the social and economic level; nevertheless, the collective function of advertising is to convert us all to the code. Since it is sanctioned by the group the code is moral, and every infraction is more or less charged with guilt. The code is totalitarian; no one escapes it: our individual flights do not negate the fact that each day we participate in its collective elaboration. Not believing in the code requires at least that we believe that others sufficiently believe in it so that we can enter the game, even if only ironically. Even actions that resist the code are carried out in relation to a society that conforms to it. This code has positive aspects, however:

1 It is no more arbitrary than any other code: the manifestation of value, even for ourselves, is the car we periodically trade in, the neighborhood we live in, and the multitude of objects that surround us and distinguish us from others. But that's not all. Have not all codes of values always been partial and arbitrary (moral codes to begin with)?

2 The code is a form of socialization, the total secularization of signs of recognition: it is therefore involved in the – at least formal – emancipation of social relations. Objects do not only facilitate material existence through their proliferation as commodities, but, generalized into signs of recognition, they facilitate the reciprocation of status among people. The system of social standing, at least, has the advantage of rendering obsolete the rituals of caste or of class and, generally, all preceding (and internal) criteria of social discrimination.

3 The code establishes, for the first time in history, a *universal* system of signs and interpretation (*lecture*). One may regret that it supplants all others. But conversely, it could be noted that the progressive decline of all other systems (of birth, of class, of positions) – the extension of competition, the largest social migration in history, the ever-increasing differentiation of social groups, and the instability of languages and their proliferation – necessitated the institution of a clear, unambiguous, and universal code of recognition. In a world where millions of strangers cross each other daily in the streets the code of "social standing" fulfills an essential social function, while it satisfies the vital need of people to be always informed about one another.

Nevertheless:

1 This universalization, this efficiency is obtained at the price of a radical simplification, of an impoverishment, and of an almost irrevocable regression in the "language" of value: "All individuals are described in terms of their objects." Coherence is obtained through the formation of a combinatorial matrix or a repertoire: hence a functional language is established, but one that is symbolically and structurally impoverished.

2 The fact that a system of interpretation (*lecture*) and recognition is today applied by everyone, or that value signs are completely socialized and objectified does not necessarily lead to true "democratization." On the contrary, it appears that the *constraint of a single referent only acts to exacerbate the desire for discrimination*. Within the very framework of this homogeneous system, we can observe the unfolding of an always renewed obsession with hierarchy and

distinction. While the barriers of morality, of stereotypes, and of language collapse, new barriers and new exclusions are erected in the field of objects: a new morality of class, or caste, can now invest itself in the most material and most undeniable of things.

Society is not becoming any more transparent, even if today the code of "social standing" is in the process of constituting an immediately legible, universal structure of signification, one that enables the fluid circulation of social representations within the group hierarchy. The code provides the image of a false transparency, of a false legibility of social relations, behind which the real structures of production and social relations remain illegible. A society would be transparent only if knowledge of the order of signification was also knowledge of the organization (*ordre*) of its structures and of social facts. This is not the case with the object/advertising system, which only offers a code of significations that is always complicit and opaque. In addition, if the code's coherence provides a formal sense of security, that is also the best means for it to extend its immanent and permanent jurisdiction over all individuals in society.

Conclusion: towards a definition of "consumption"

I would like to conclude the analysis of our relation to objects as a systematic process, which was developed on different levels, with a definition of "consumption," since it is here that all the elements of an actual practice in this domain converge.

In fact we can conceive of consumption as a characteristic mode of industrial civilization on the condition that we separate it fundamentally from its current meaning as a process of satisfaction of needs. Consumption is not a passive mode of assimilation (*absorption*) and appropriation which we can oppose to an active mode of production, in order to bring to bear naive concepts of action (and alienation). From the outset, we must clearly state that consumption is an active mode of relations (not only to objects, but to the collectivity and to the world), a systematic mode of activity and a global response on which our whole cultural system is founded.

We must clearly state that material goods are not the objects of consumption: they are merely the objects of need and satisfaction. We have all at times purchased, possessed, enjoyed, and spent, and yet not "consumed." "Primitive" festivities, the prodigality of the feudal lord,

or the luxury of the nineteenth-century bourgeois – these are not acts of consumption. And if we are justified in using this term for contemporary society, it is not because we are better fed, or that we assimilate more images and messages, or that we have more appliances and gadgets at our disposal. Neither the quantity of goods, nor the satisfaction of needs is sufficient to define the concept of consumption: they are merely its preconditions.

Consumption is neither a material practice, nor a phenomenology of "affluence." It is not defined by the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the car we drive, nor by the visual and oral substance of images and messages, but in the organization of all this as signifying substance. Consumption is *the virtual totality of all objects and messages presently constituted in a more or less coherent discourse*. Consumption, in so far as it is meaningful, is *a systematic act of the manipulation of signs*.

The traditional object-symbol (tools, furniture, even the house), mediator of a real relation or of a lived (*veçue*) situation, clearly bears the trace, in its substance and in its form, of the conscious and unconscious dynamics of this relation, and is therefore not arbitrary. This object, which is bound, impregnated, and heavy with connotation, yet actualized (*vivant*) through its relation of interiority and transitivity with the human gesture or fact (collective or individual), is not consumed. *In order to become object of consumption, the object must become sign*; that is, in some way it must become external to a relation that it now only signifies, a-signed *arbitrarily* and non-coherently to this concrete relation, yet obtaining its coherence, and consequently its meaning, from an abstract and systematic relation to all other object-signs. It is in this way that it becomes "personalized," and enters in the series, etc.: it is never consumed in its materiality, but in its difference.

The conversion of the object to a systematized status of signs entails a concomitant modification in the human relation, which becomes a relation of consumption. That is to say, human relations tend to be consumed (*consommer*) (in the double sense of the word: to be "fulfilled," and to be "annulled")²⁴ in and through objects, which become the necessary mediation and, rapidly, the substitutive sign, *the alibi*, of the relation.

We can see that what is consumed are not objects but the relation itself – signified and absent, included and excluded at the same time – it is *the idea of the relation* that is consumed in the series of objects which manifests it.

This is no longer a lived relation: it is abstracted and annulled in an object-sign where it is consumed.