In the Shadow of McLuhan: Jean Baudrillard's Theory of Simulation

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A few years ago an event took place at the Whitney
Museum in New York City. It came at the tail end of a
David Salle exhibition, a major retrospective (1979–86) of
an artist who, only a decade earlier, was doing layout and
graphic work for a pornographic magazine, an artist who
has had one of the fastest rises to painterly stardom in an
art market bent on overtaking itself. The event I refer to
was announced on a huge poster: JEAN BAUDRILLARD.
SOLD OUT. "Sold Out" was written in big block letters
diagonally across the surface. And then, again horizontally:
TOPIC TO BE ANNOUNCED. Clearly, we live in an
age of fast art and speedy theory. The day may come, say
in 1999, when the museum will announce a new show:
RETROSPECTIVE — WORKS FROM 1999 TO 2001.
ARTIST TO BE ANNOUNCED.

I do not know what Baudrillard spoke about at the Whit-
ney, and ultimately it matters very little. The point is that
what happened here perfectly illustrates one of Baudril-
lard's own arguments, namely, that simulation has
replaced production at the center of our social system, that
contemporary culture has gone beyond the classical Marx-
ist use value/exchange value distinction — a distinction
still at the heart of Adorno's frozen dialectic of modernism
and mass culture — and operates on the basis of sign value
writ large. Sign value is, in this case, the case of theory,
the case of Baudrillard at the Whitney, obviously name
value, the name functioning as the signifier/signified unit
that attracts the audience: no need to give a topic; we

already know what we will get. Retrogressive from a theoretical point of view, at least in a Baudrillardian perspective, the referent still would have to appear in person, would have to walk through the doors of the museum and get up in front of his audience to deliver the goods. In the scheme of simulation, of course, the body as referent becomes so much refuse: "The real itself appears as a large useless body."[1] At best, it could be seen as residue supporting the system's need to simulate the real. So, if Baudrillard shows up at the Whitney, does that make him complicitous in late capitalism's scheme to simulate the real where there "really" is no real left? Or does Baudrillard's theory of simulation express the post-1968 despair of the leftist French intellectual that there is no real Left left? Or could it be that Baudrillard's lecture never took place, that "Sold Out" was inscribed on the poster from the start, and that therefore no one ever came to buy a ticket? And yet the annals of the museum would now record: lecture by Jean Baudrillard, such and such a day, 1987. This scenario would clearly work better with the theory of simulation, of the map preceding the territory rather than representing it. But this is still America, the country famous for its obsession with "the real thing," and there does exist a political economy of culture, deeply implicated, to be sure, in processes of signification and simulation, but not, I think, reducible to them. To see the entanglements of the real as no more than simulations designed by the system to feign that something is there, a presence, a referent, a real, is a form of ontologizing simulation that betrays, perhaps, nothing so much as a desire for the real, a nostalgia of loss. And yet the theory of simulation, which has at its center what in France is called *la télématique* (a neologism from *télévision* and *informatique*), exerts an understandable fascination since it seems to account for certain very "real" tendencies of contemporary culture, extrapolates them polemically, and grounds them in the evolution from the 1960s of telecommunications.

Of course, Baudrillard's theory of simulation and of the simulacrum, as elaborated over a decade in a series of writings from the "Requiem for the Media" in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* through *L'Echange symbolique et la mort* to *In the Shadow of the Silent*

Majorities and *Simulations*, is primarily a media theory. As such, its reception is by no means limited to artists and the contemporary art scene, even though in the United States in recent years that is where its strongest effect seems to have been felt. It is precisely the notion of simulation in all its breadth and implications that accounts for Baudrillard's cult following in New York, on the West Coast, in Australia, in Berlin, and even in Frankfurt, where his writings can be perceived as true to the spirit of Adorno's evil-eyed critique of mass culture. And it is exactly Baudrillard's status as a cult figure on the fringes of the academy and the plain outside it that makes him comparable to another prophet of the media in the United States at an earlier time, Marshall McLuhan. Granted, the parallel is not quite persuasive in purely quantitative terms. McLuhan's *Understanding Media* sold well over a hundred thousand copies, a figure of which Semiotext(e) and Telos Press, the two American publishers of Baudrillard's work, could only dream; moreover, Baudrillard would still have to appear in *Time, Newsweek, Vogue, Esquire, Fortune, Playboy,* and the *New York Times Magazine,* which seems highly unlikely. And yet . . .

In this essay I would like to explore the hidden referent of Baudrillard's media theory, which in its political and social implications is always much more than a theory of images and image perception. To be sure, the textual referent of Baudrillard's writing may be less hidden than simply forgotten. After all, Baudrillard's texts are full of references to McLuhan's work. Much less clear, however, is what this appropriation of McLuhan for the 1980s actually means and what kind of appropriation it is. Is the theory of simulation a postmodern recycling of McLuhan for a present in which his writings are largely forgotten and his name for most conjures up no more than a few slogans such as "the medium is the message, or the massage," or the happy formula of the global village? Does Baudrillard, in other words, merely offer a theoretical pastiche based on amnesia? Or does Baudrillard's continuing fascination with McLuhan suggest that what was prophecy in McLuhan has some twenty years later become reality? Or is something else at stake altogether?

It would be too easy to speak of a return of McLuhan in the guise of French theory and then to use the timeworn arsenal of ideology critique against both. The critique of McLuhan from the vantage point of Western Marxism and critical theory, as admirably articulated in John Fekete's *The Critical Twilight*,[2] was surely important at a period when McLuhan advised the federal government of Canada and moved liberally through the executive suites of Bell Telephone, IBM, and General Motors, and when a veritable McLuhan cult swept the major mass circulation magazines, radio programs, and television talk shows. His unbounded optimism about the effects of electronic communications on human community and his blindness to the relationship between the media and economic and political power could only be read as an affirmative culture, as an apology for ruthless technological modernization, or, at best, as naïve politics. At the same time, the effects of McLuhan's theorizing of the media on the political strategies of the 1960s counterculture were anything but merely affirmative. Today, however, McLuhanism (or McLuhanacy, as some have called it) is no longer a major force in public discourse, and media cynicism (both affirmative and critical) seems to have thoroughly displaced the cosmic media optimism so typical of a certain communications euphoria in the 1960s. In this new discursive context, the ideology critique of McLuhan's work, though not invalid, seems less immediately pressing; casting aside McLuhan's social prophecies that the electric age is said to entail, we can focus again on what McLuhan actually argued about different media, media reception, and media effects. In *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*, McLuhan wrote quite persuasively:

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the massage. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.[3]

To understand how that massage works, how it operates in socialization and perception, in the construction of gender and subjectivity, how it inscribes its message into the body by disembodying the real, and how it itself embodies an apparatus of mediatized power relations, what its effects are in social practices and institutionalized discourses — these questions certainly arise from a reading of McLuhan today, and they remain central to any study of the media in the contemporary world. And it is to Baudrillard's credit that, apart from the Roland Barthes of *Mythologies*, he is one of the very few major figures in the orbit of French post-Marxism and poststructuralism that has made the media the centerpiece of his theorizing. Here, however, I must voice a basic reservation about Baudrillard. While McLuhan's media analyses may still serve as a reference point, at least to the historically minded, for further media studies, the very structure of Baudrillard's theorizing is ultimately disabling in its *reductio ad absurdum* of the power of the image. His notion of the silent mass of spectators disables any analysis of heterogeneous subject positions in the act of reception. Any economic or institutional analysis of the apparatuses of image production, including national differences even within Western mass media societies, is rendered obsolete by Baudrillard's notion of an almost self-generating and monolithic machinery of image dissemination. The history of the media is reduced, as I will show, to stages of the image, an approach that seems to have more to do with Platonic and Christian traditions than with any historical understanding of the media, modern or premodern. Any ideology critique of representations of gender or race, of the politics of imaging the various worlds of this world is disabled because ideology critique, even when truth and the real have become unstable, must continue to rely on some distinction between representations and to analyze their varying relationship to domination and subjection, their inscriptions of power, interest, and desire. Baudrillard's society of simulation does not allow for such distinctions, nor, for that matter, for the viability of any ideology critique. If the 1960s gave us "the end of ideology," the 1980s have given us the alleged end of ideology critique. To put the shoe on the proper foot, the ideology critique of Baudrillard's theorizing is urgent precisely because the theory of simulation offers nothing but the solace of instant intellectual gratification to those who are uninterested in understanding media or in analyzing them as vehicles for ideology. Simulation, after all, may simply be the latest version of the ideology of the end of all ideology.

Even were Baudrillard's texts themselves nothing but simulations — an argument made by playfully cynical defenders of his work — one would have to conclude that as simulations these texts participate affirmatively in the operations of a system that, as Baudrillard claims, merely simulates the real to maintain the status quo: Baudrillard as the cynical defender of what is the case merely because it is the case. If simulation had already become total, this would indeed seem the only possible position left to the critic, even though lacking the ground to stand on from which to proclaim "what is the case." If an outside of simulation is no longer possible, then the question of the real becomes like the question of God or the question of truth: not provable, but also not to be disproven, or not representable, therefore in desperate need to be simulated to conceal the truth that there is none. God and truth: Is it a coincidence that Baudrillard begins "The Precession of Simulacra," the lead essay of *Simulations* and perhaps his most influential piece, with a quotation from Ecclesiastes, to proceed, a few pages later, with a discussion of the death of God? It is the simulacrum of God, which suggests "that ultimately there has never been any God, that only the simulacrum exists, indeed that God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum."[4] Baudrillard goes on to use the iconoclasts' rage against images to elucidate the pomp and power of fascination exerted by simulacra through the ages. But it seems that even now the critic, though this should be theoretically impossible, is still involved in an act of secular demystification: where capital simulates the real to hide the truth that there is none, the critic operates out of the consciousness of the total collapse of any distinction between the real and the simulated, essence and appearance, truth and lie. After all, how are we to read Baudrillard's texts if not as demystifications of Marxism and psychoanalysis, as a debunking of cherished concepts such as labor and use value, desire and the unconscious, the real and the imaginary, the social, the political, communications, information, and so on. We have here a logical aporia, but logical aporias have never yet prevented theories from having strong effects, or, for that matter, from grasping something important. Thus, alternatively, we might read these texts as claiming that the most recent order of simulacra is indeed part of our "real-

ity," represents, as it were, central aspects of the current state of affairs, the result of a cultural transformation that separates what is often called the postmodern condition from an earlier age of media, mass culture, and commodification. Although this reading would reject Baudrillard's basic claim that the simulacrum has become total, I find such an approach more appropriate and fruitful precisely because it does not give up at the outset any notion of the real. Against a certain kind of hyper-Nietzscheanism, it maintains the tension between simulation and representation, a sine qua non for critical media studies. Nor does it blindly accept Baudrillard's dictum, abusively derived from Benjamin, that "the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced. The hyperreal . . . which is entirely in simulation."[5]

But I do not mean to read Baudrillard against the grain. The strategy of this essay is rather to show how some of the most questionable patterns of McLuhan's media theory resurface in Baudrillard's work, though in a substantially altered form. The purpose of this exercise is less to prove that Baudrillard plundered McLuhan, than to posit a trajectory from the affirmative media optimism of the 1960s to an equally affirmative media cynicism in the 1980s, a cynicism that has cut its links to an enlightened modernity in search of apocalyptic bliss. I take the theory of simulation to be a strategic point of articulation of that cynicism, an enlightened false consciousness, which Peter Sloterdijk has cogently analyzed as a dominant mindset in the post-sixties era.[6]

To begin with, it might be useful to remember that McLuhan originally came out of literary criticism. He was a professor of English literature in Toronto. Indeed, his method of reading social phenomena and the history of media technology, as Fekete has pointed out,[7] is strongly informed by the trajectory of the New Criticism from Richards and Eliot to Ransom and Frye and shares with it an emphatic foregrounding of myth. Baudrillard, when faced with new forms of consumer and media culture in the 1960s, attacked the discourse of classical Western Marxism, up to and including Guy Debord's situationism,

with the help of structural linguistics and theories of signi-
fication. Likewise, McLuhan attacked the hostility of tradi-
tional humanists to media and modernization and insisted
that the humanists' task was more than just the narrow
literary study of classical or modern texts, that it was no
longer possible "to adopt the aloof and dissociated role of
the literate Westerner."[8] What linguistic theory was for
Baudrillard's sociology, popular culture and the media
were for McLuhan's cultural criticism: a means to attack
the hegemonic discourse of their respective disciplines.
Where Baudrillard announced the end of classical political
economy, McLuhan claimed that the age of literacy, the
Gutenberg galaxy, was coming to an end in the electronic
age. Where Baudrillard focused on the importance of pro-
cesses of signification in language and image first to
expand the classical Marxist critique of reification and
commodification and ultimately to dump it, McLuhan
carried cultural criticism into the realm of popular culture,
abandoned literature altogether, and yet remained true to
his new critical heritage in privileging the medium over
the message.

McLuhan recognized correctly that critiques of technology
and of media on the part of humanists more often than
not came out of an affect of resentment and out of a total
identification with literary high culture. His basic project
in the late 1950s and early 1960s was to understand the
media rather than entirely to dismiss them. The media
never represented a threat to him, and in that he differed
from conservative critics as well as from neo-Marxists such
as Adorno. Not to understand the media: that was the only
threat, the only danger for Marshall McLuhan. But then,
from the beginning, his kind of understanding could
hardly be distinguished from advertising. His message —
beyond that of the medium — was simple: feel good, for-
get your anxieties, surrender to the media, stay cool, and
everything will be alright. In the *Playboy* interview of 1969
he said, "It's inevitable that the whirlpool of electronic
information movement will toss us all about like corks on
a stormy sea, but if we keep our cool during the descent
into the Maelstrom, studying the process as it happens to
us and what we can do about it, we can come through."[9]
With Baudrillard we are not being tossed about like corks

on a stormy sea; conditions have worsened, and we are
being swallowed up by the notorious black hole, implosion
the astrophysical equivalent of "engulfment" in the Nietz-
schean discourse of mass culture that, as I have shown
elsewhere, is perceived as a feminine threat to "real" cul-
ture.[10] The millenarian "coming through" has been
replaced in Baudrillard by an apocalyptic vanishing act.
But the images and metaphors of natural disaster and astro-
physics abound in both McLuhan and Baudrillard.

Indeed, many of the key terms of Baudrillard's rhetoric
appear on the first page of what is perhaps McLuhan's
major work, *Understanding Media*.

After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary
and mechanical technologies, the Western World is imploding.
During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in
space. Today . . . we have extended our central nervous system
itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far
as our planet is concerned. Rapidly we approach the final phase
of the extensions of man — the technological simulation of
consciousness. . . .[11]

The notion that technology is an extension of the human
body is familiar from anthropology and the history of tech-
nology. What is new in McLuhan is the claim that we are
witnessing a worldwide paradigm shift from extension and
explosion to implosion, from an outward expansion to a
bursting inward. For McLuhan, this paradigm shift is a
product of the move from mechanical to electric technolo-
gies. He proceeds, further, to link the shift in technologies
to another binarism, that between hot and cool media,
a distinction that immediately conjures up the Levi-
Straussian distinction between hot and cool (modern/
primitive) societies. Hot and cool oppose each other like
print and speech, radio and the telephone, film and televi-
sion. The rationale for these distinctions is often eccentric
and contradictory, leading Daniel Bell to claim in anti-
hedonist despair that reading McLuhan is like taking a
Turkish bath of the mind.[12]

But things are not quite as steamy and unsettling in
McLuhan after all. What emerges quite clearly is that the
two sets of binarisms (explosion/implosion and hot/cool)
lead up to a large-scale historical periodization of cultural

stages, which McLuhan claims are effected, even deter-
mined, by changes in communications technology. The
anthropological notion of culture as a system of communi-
cation is rewritten in terms of contemporary communica-
tions technology, and it results in a kind of technological
Geistesgeschichte, a pattern that will reappear in Baudril-
lard. McLuhan isolates four stages of cultural history: one,
a "primitive," tribal society, a cool audile culture with an
oral technology of speech; two, a hot visual culture with a
technology of phonetic writing; three, an even hotter visual
culture with the mechanical technology of print (the
Gutenberg galaxy); and four, a return to a cool culture on
a higher level, an audile-tactile culture with an electric
technology of television and the computer.

The persistent issue in this scheme is the rise and decline
of visuality, and McLuhan associates visuality with linear
continuity, uniformity, abstraction, and individualization.
This culture of visuality is characterized by separation, dis-
tance, alienation, and the dissociation of sensibility — rei-
fication, as the early Baudrillard would call it with Lukács
and Debord. This culture of visuality, modernity in other
words, is about to be superseded by a culture of instanta-
neous inclusiveness, a mythical and integral culture in
which "electric speed [brings together] all social and politi-
cal functions in a sudden implosion" and in which "the
electrically contracted globe is no more than a village."[13]
Obvious difficulties arise in following McLuhan's claim
that television somehow initiates the promised land of an
audile-tactile, postvisual culture. One could claim, as Jon-
athan Crary has done, that McLuhan's 1960s definition of
television as cool was founded on features of a medium
still in its infancy: the low definition of its image and the
image's small size, features that would no longer pertain in
an age of high-resolution TV and of large home screens.[14]
But another factor must be considered here that has to do
with reception. Contrary to film, which, according to
McLuhan, isolates the spectator, television has the power
to create community; it retribalizes the world. Features
that were attributed to film by Brecht and Benjamin under
the name of a collectivizing reception resurface in
McLuhan's scheme in relation to television, except that
the socialist vision of collective reception is replaced by an
idea of television as tribal drum. There is a constant slid-

ing of categories in McLuhan from the technological to
the social and vice versa that produces implausibilities and
contradictions galore. But, then, at stake here is not really
history, neither a history of the media nor a history of
human culture. At stake is a "mythic pattern of fall and
salvation," to quote Fekete. Ultimately the four stages of
cultural history can be reduced to three, collapsing the two
middle phases of visual culture (the phonetic and the
Gutenberg) into one: the age of literacy. We end up with a
trinity of tribalism (cool), detribalization (hot), and retribal-
ization (cool). Television ushers us into the age of post-
literacy. Implosion and feedback loops replace explosion
and linearity. Integration replaces fragmentation. The cul-
ture of Western humanism, which, after all, is a culture of
literacy, has disappeared, and McLuhan is happy about it:
a technocratic version of antihumanism, which, however,
differs greatly from the structuralist "death of man." Thus
in the introduction to *Understanding Media* we read that

the aspiration of our time for wholeness, empathy and depth of
awareness is a natural adjunct of electric technology. . . . We are
suddenly eager to have things and people declare their beings
totally. There is a deep faith to be found in this new attitude — a
faith that concerns the ultimate harmony of all being. Such is the
faith in which this book has been written.[15]

Indeed, the mythic pattern of fall and salvation must be
taken at its most catholic. Try an experiment in reading:
for electricity substitute the Holy Spirit, for medium read
God, and for the global village of the screen understand
the planet united under Rome. Rather than offering a
media theory McLuhan offers a media theology in its most
technocratic and reified form. God is the ultimate aim
of implosion, and the question becomes, What about
Baudrillard?

Baudrillard's engagement with McLuhan's work began as
far back as 1967, when he reviewed the French translation
of *Understanding Media* in the leftist journal *L'Homme et
la société*. This review is interesting because not only does
it contain a scathing critique of McLuhan's media idealism
from the vantage point of Marxism and historical sociol-
ogy, but further, it already displays signs of Baudrillard's
later fascination with McLuhan's central propositions. This

fascination comes through in Baudrillard's style and rhetorical strategies rather than in the argument itself, and it shows in the ways in which he makes McLuhan speak out against the "generally morose prophecies" of European mass medialogues. This disparagement is certainly not exclusively directed agaist conservative laments about the decline of culture, but equally against monolithic media theories on the Left. On the level of explicit argument, however, Baudrillard's critique of McLuhan is uncompromising and relentless:

Evidently, there is a simple reason for this [McLuhan's] optimism: it is founded on the total failure to understand history, more precisely to understand the social history of the media.[16]

By focusing exclusively on the infrastructural revolutions of the media, McLuhan ignores, according to Baudrillard,

all those historical convulsions, ideologies, and the remarkable persistence (even resurgence) of political imperialisms, nationalisms, and bureaucratic feudalisms in this era of accelerated communication and participation.[17]

The question here, of course, is whether this pre-1968 critique of McLuhan cannot be raised against Baudrillard's own writings on the media, whether in *Simulations* or in *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* he himself has not capitulated to what in 1967 he called "this most passionate and most dangerous paradox" of McLuhan's work: the notion that the medium is the message. After all, Baudrillard's whole critique of the Marxist production paradigm presupposes the emergence of television as a culturally dominant apparatus. His analysis of consumption — consumption of objects as well as of significations — as a system of communication through which a repressive code is continuously and seamlessly reproduced; his thesis that the sphere of signification is formally identical to the sphere of exchange (with the signified anchoring the signifier in a referent, just as use value is held to anchor exchange value in classical Marxism); his concomitant discovery of what he calls the political economy of the sign, with its proposition that the commodity form is no longer at the center of the social system, but that the structure of the sign resides at the very heart of the commodity form; up to his theory of simulation that announces the end of all and any political economy, the end of the referent, the real, the politi-

cal, the social — all of this theorizing is unthinkable, it seems to me, without the impact of television. By which I mean television as the apparatus and machinery of simulation, television as a network that integrates the flows of signification and information with that of commodities, and that ultimately drains the real out of commodities and out of events, reducing them to so many images on the screen that refer only to other images. Certainly, if there is technological determinism, media determinism, in Baudrillard, it is more sophisticated than McLuhan's in that it does not simply ignore the discourses of social theory and political economy, but claims to have worked through them and to have used them up. Another major difference is apparent: from early on, Baudrillard replaces McLuhan's unbridled media optimism with a dystopian vision similar to that of the situationists and, by way of extension, to that of Adorno's critique of the culture industry:

In short, there comes into being a manifold universe of media that are homogeneous in their capacity as media and which mutually signify each other and refer back to each other. Each one is reciprocally the content of another; indeed, this ultimately is their message — the totalitarian message of a consumer society. . . . This technological complex, nevertheless, does convey a certain kind of imperious message: a message of consumption of the message, of spectacularization, of autonomization and valorization of information as a commodity, of glorification of the content treated as sign. (In this regard, advertising is the contemporary medium par excellence.)[18]

Baudrillard's later theory of simulation can indeed be read as a logical extension, an extension into vertigo, of the situationist proposition, as articulated in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, that when reality is systematically turned into a spectacle, the spectacle itself becomes reality. But one major difference between the situationists and Baudrillard's early work, on the one hand, and the later theory of simulation, on the other, might be worth pointing out. In the late 1960s, Baudrillard, like the situationists, still relied on concepts such as reification and alienation as they had been developed in the work of Lukács and Henri Lefebvre, among others. In his review of *Understanding Media*, for instance, Baudrillard calls McLuhan's slogan "the medium is the message" "the very formula of alienation in a technological society."[19] Con-

cepts such as reification and alienation, of course, suggest a state of the nonreified, the noncommodified, the non-alienated that could provide the desired space for political and symbolic resistance. While it has become fashionable in recent years simply to dismiss such concepts as essential-ist and conceptually retrogressive, this does not do justice to the ways in which the critique of reification and aliena-tion operated in the late 1960s. The nonreified, the non-alienated would precisely not be sought in some abstract and universal essence of "man," beyond and outside of social and historical determinations and contingencies. Resistance would come rather from those groups that were underrepresented, as it were, by the code, excluded from representation, marginalized, and reduced to a degree zero of the hegemonic code where their speech did not count or was never really heard. Such social groups (youth and students, women, blacks) would not only clamor for more representation in the code; they would attack the code itself, or so it was hoped. A kind of "semiological banditry" by the "damned of the code" was invested with hopes for rebellion, authenticity, political opposition.[20] That is what the *prise de la parole* of May 1968 was all about. With these hopes crushed and the political restoration of the 1970s making great strides, Baudrillard became increas-ingly critical of the discourse of marginality and alienation, and he came to interpret the marginal as a mere simula-tion of resistance, produced in actuality by the master code itself. Thus in *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* he rejects the notion that a new source of revolutionary energy can be found in "micro-desires, small differences, unconscious practices, anonymous marginalities." In a sweeping gesture, he accuses intellectuals of a "final somersault . . . to exalt insignificance, to promote non-sense into the order of sense," and he denounces this strat-egy as "one more trick of the 'liberationists.'"[21] The targets of Baudrillard's critique are primarily Deleuze/Guattari and Foucault. But while he rejects political theories of the marginal and of the liberation of desire, he remains ambig-uous in his treatment of the other of marginality: the mass, the mass as silent majority, the mass as recipient and object of the media, object of surveys, polls, tests, refer-enda, in sum, the mass as a projective screen of the dis-course of power. The text vacillates strangely between

cynicism and approval of the silence of the silent majority. But, as a close reading will reveal, Baudrillard still invests the silence of the masses with emphatic notions of refusal and resistance. The masses are to him pagan, anti-transcendence, antifaith, anti-God. He glorifies their refusal of meaning as a refusal of indoctrination by the media. He describes the desire of the masses for spectacle instead of meaning as "the positive brutality" of indiffer-ence.[22] Silence he sees as a refusal of the fiction of any real exchange, as a protest based on the acknowledg-ment that the modern media per se inhibit and prevent exchange, response, participation.[23]

The rationale for Baudrillard's paradoxical validation of the silence of the masses and of their defiance of meaning is most clearly and persuasively spelled out in *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* in the brief essay "Implosion of Meaning in the Media." Here Baudrillard talks about the "double bind" in our relation to the media culture, com-paring it to the double strategies children use in relation to conflicting adult demands, on the one hand, that they be autonomous subjects and, on the other, that they obey.

The resistance as subject is today unilaterally valorized, held as positive — just as in the political sphere only the practices of liberation, emancipation, expression, and constitution as a politi-cal subject are taken to be valuable and subversive. But this is to ignore the equal, or perhaps even superior impact, of all the practices-as-object — the renunciation of the position of subject and of meaning — exactly the practices of the masses — which we bury and forget under the contemptuous terms of alienation and passivity. The liberating practices respond to *one* of the aspects of the system, to the constant ultimatum to make of our-selves pure objects, but they don't respond at all to the other demand, which is to constitute ourselves as subjects, to liberate ourselves, to express ourselves at any price, to vote, produce, decide, speak, participate, play the game — a form of blackmail and ultimatum just as serious as the other, probably even more serious today. To a system whose argument is oppression and repression, the strategic resistance is the liberating claim of subjecthood. But this reflects rather the system's previous phase, and even if we are still confronted with it, it is no longer the strategic terrain: the system's current argument is the maximiza-tion of the word and the maximal production of meaning. Thus the strategic resistance is that of a refusal of meaning and a refusal of the word — or the hyperconformist simulation of the

very mechanisms of the system, which is a form of refusal and of nonreception.[24]

While this passage is quite persuasive in its outline of the double bind and its political implications, it becomes problematic where it ventures into a theory of history, a theory of subsequent stages of the system. And even if we agree with Baudrillard's critique of a certain prominent romanticization of marginality or otherness, it seems that he can and should be criticized for romanticizing mass refusal as hyperconformism, a kind of Marcuseanism for an age of diminished expectations.

Of course, Baudrillard is fairly far from McLuhan when he ascribes to the masses a full understanding of McLuhan's basic proposition about the media and, simultaneously, a conscious resistance to the media. But then he did not stick with this position for very long. Certainly, with "The Precession of Simulacra" any notion of resistance has disappeared, and we are left with a monolithic vision of contemporary culture that seems evermore like a binary reversal of McLuhan, but McLuhan nevertheless. And in *Les Stratégies fatales*, McLuhan's "euphoria" comes back as the "ecstasy of communication,"[25] which strikes me as a blend of Dionysian chaos with American "more is better." Technological determinism runs amok, transforming itself into a phantasmagoria of the screen.

Something has changed, and the Faustian, Promethean (perhaps Oedipal) period of production and consumption gives way to the 'proteanic' era of networks, to the narcissistic and protean area of connections, contacts, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface that goes with the universe of communication. With the television image . . . our own body and the whole surrounding universe become a control screen.[26]

Of course, one could say that here Baudrillard enacts what he preaches: the age of the simulacrum, of the map preceding the territory. Rather than representing reality, his text could be read as simulating what is still to come. But even then, I would say that it rather recycles what once was: namely, the terms of McLuhan's large-scale periodizing and his notion of the world of communications as a tactile world of contact, connections, and feedback, rather

than a visual world of, in Baudrillard's terms, the scene/seen or the mirror.

It is striking to see how McLuhan's grand historical scheme is reworked in Baudrillard from the mid-1970s on. In his 1967 review of McLuhan, Baudrillard still had this to say about the Canadian:

Every ten years American cultural sociology secretes grand directional schemes in which a diagonal analysis of all civilization ends up circling back to contemporary American reality as implicit telos and model of the future.[27]

Ten years later, this kind of American cultural sociology has evidently caught up with Baudrillard himself, and the European phantasmagoria "America" dominates the Baudrillardian discourse (enhanced, no doubt, by jet lag and its effects on perception and experience). From his discussions of Disneyland and Watergate by way of the twin towers of the World Trade Center to *Apocalypse Now* to his book of 1986, *Amerique*, the ultimate referent of Baudrillard's discursive simulations is the United States, or rather, an imaginary United States. America is paradigm and telos for the theory of simulation as it was paradigm and telos in McLuhan's theory of the electric age. But the parallel goes further. Already in *L'Echange symbolique et la mort* and then again in "The Precession of Simulacra," Baudrillard reads history in terms of the successive stages of the simulacrum, just as McLuhan read history as a function of changes in media technology. What is interesting here is that his 1976 periodization of simulacra is still linked to the Marxist discourse of value, while in the later text the successive phases of the image are discussed in theological terms — yet another rapprochement with McLuhan.

Let me briefly lay out the two schemes. The chapter on the orders of simulacra in *L'Echange symbolique et la mort* is introduced in the following way:

Three orders of the simulacrum, parallel to the mutations of the law of value, have followed one another since the Renaissance:

— *Counterfeit* is the dominant scheme of the 'classical' period, from the Renaissance to the industrial revolution;

— *Production* is the dominant scheme of the industrial era;

— *Simulation* is the reigning scheme of the current phase that is controlled by the code.[28]

These three phases of the simulacrum correspond to three phases in the history of the law of value: first, the pre-capitalist phase of the natural law of value in which land is the carrier of value; second, the capitalist law of value, as described by Marx, in which the exchange value of the commodity comes to dominate its use value; and third, the phase of what Baudrillard calls the structural law of value in which capital in a kind of linguistic combinatoire of signs begins to float freely, swallowing up all the earlier determinations of value, be they nature, use value, production or meaning, purpose, truth. What remains is a world of universal simulation in which capital functions as a gigantic machinery of devaluation. Baudrillard's theory of simulation as a theory of the latest stage in the development of capital is, of course, a theory of catastrophe and of nihilism, a Nietzschean nihilism come into its own with the help of technology: the TV screen and the computer.

This may all sound very unlike McLuhan, until one remembers that implosion for Baudrillard is not "catastrophic" in the usual sense of the word, but suggests something like redemption, redemption in hyperreality.[29] And the rapprochement with McLuhan continues in the second scheme of the order of simulacra. As I indicated before, there is a discursive shift in Baudrillard's theory of simulation. The categories of political economy, even the political economy of the sign, vanish and are replaced by the language of theology, most visibly in "The Precession of Simulacra." He still pretends to offer a history of the image in the following scheme: The image is "the reflection of a basic reality" (that is, representation; the sign and the real are somehow equivalent); it "masks and perverts a basic reality" (Marx's notion of ideology as false consciousness); it "masks the *absence* of a basic reality" (Nietzsche's attack on truth, metaphysics, and representation); it "bears no relation to any reality: it is its own pure simulacrum" (the image on the electronic screen).[30]

So far, so good. I suppose here one could argue that Baudrillard's interest in this scheme is less historical than systematic. But then suddenly history reenters with a vengeance by way of the death of God, the last judgment and resurrection. First Baudrillard names the four orders of the image — the order of the sacrament, the order of male-

fice, the order of sorcery, and the order of simulation — and he distinguishes between signs that dissimulate something (the first two) and signs that dissimulate that there is nothing (the last two). This distinction for him marks a major historical turning point, clearly localizable with Nietzsche:

The first [reflection and masking of a basic reality] implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second [masking the absence of a basic reality and pure simulation] inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer any God to recognize his own, nor any last judgment to separate true from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance.[31]

Here Baudrillard's discourse leaves the realm of history and contemporary culture altogether and somersaults into a kind of catastrophic theology that will leave us forever, I presume, with simulation, the hyperreal, and capital as a system of floating signifiers unchained from any referent whatsoever. Simulation, indeed. A melancholy fixation on the loss of the real flips over into a desire to get beyond the real, beyond the body, beyond history. It is a religious desire, a desire for ultimate transcendence, achieved in Baudrillard, as in McLuhan, through the media. So what are we to find at the end of implosion, "inside" the black hole about which Baudrillard keeps fantasizing? Perhaps a postmodern potlatch in a global village. But we will never know, since the black hole will have absorbed all light, all images, all simulations. Iconoclasm writ large will have won the day, or rather: the night when television has finally gone off the air.

Notes

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1. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 138.

2. John Fekete, *The Critical Twilight* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977).

3. Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 26.

4. Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 8.

5. Hyperquote on the back cover of *Simulations*.

6. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Sloterdijk is more successful in his critique of a postenlightened cynicism than he is in his proposal of countercultural cynical alternatives.

7. Fekete, *Critical Twilight*, 149.

8. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 20.

9. "Marshall McLuhan: A Candid Conversation with the High Priest of Popcult and Metaphysician of Media," *Playboy* (March 1969): 158.

10. Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in *After the Great Divide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

11. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 19.

12. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 73.

13. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 20.

14. Jonathan Crary, "Eclipse of the Spectacle," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 284.

15. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 21.

16. Jean Baudrillard, "Marshall McLuhan: *Understanding Media*,"

L'Homme et la société 5 (July–September 1967): 229.

17. Ibid., 230.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. For some excellent discussions of Baudrillard's cultural politics, see André Frankovits, ed., *Seduced and Abandoned: The Baudrillard Scene* (Glebe: Stonemoss Services, 1984), especially the essay by Meaghan Morris, "Room 101, Or a Few Worst Things in the World."

21. Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or, The End of the Social* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 40.

22. Ibid., 13.

23. This is also the argument of Baudrillard's essay "Requiem for the Media," in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), and its critique of Brecht and Enzenberger's paradigm of *Umfunktionierung*, or reutilization.

24. Jean Baudrillard, "Implosion of Meaning in the Media," in *Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 107–8.

25. Jean Baudrillard, *Les Stratégies fatales* (Paris: Grasset, 1983).

26. Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," 136.

27. Baudrillard, "Marshall McLuhan," 227.

28. Jean Baudrillard, "L'Ordre des simulacres," in *L'Echange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976); trans. as "The Orders of Simulacra," in *Simulations*, 83.

29. Baudrillard, *Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 58ff. See also idem, "Sur le nihilisme," in *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1981), 229–36.

30. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 11.

31. Ibid., 12.

Figure Credit

David Cronenberg, *Videodrome*, 1983.