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*Signification and political economy in Baudrillard.*

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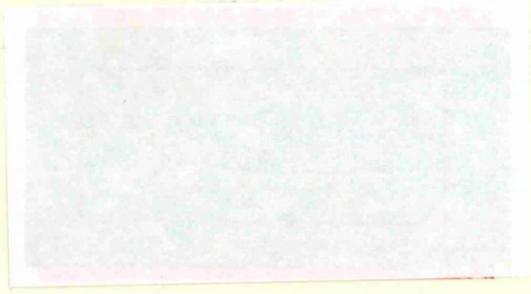
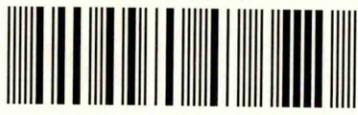
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# **SIGNIFICATION AND POLITICAL ECONOMY IN BAUDRILLARD**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Sheffield Hallam University  
for the degree of Master of Philosophy

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## Abstract

This thesis presents a critical assessment of the relation between signification and political economy in the work of Jean Baudrillard. It argues that Baudrillard's work should be read as an important but flawed contribution to critical theory rather than as an exemplar of a postmodern semiotic nihilism. Expositions of Baudrillard's position in relation to political economy and the development of his thought are contrasted with other, Marxist inspired accounts of political economy and signification. Baudrillard's account of commodity capitalism is shown to be an attempt to develop a radical political position within the camp of the left, which, however, rejects the fundamental tenets of Marxism. In putting forward this critique of commodity capitalism, Baudrillard argues that the structure of the sign is essential to the commodity form and the thesis considers the merits and limitations of his notion of 'symbolic exchange' which he puts forward as an alternative to commodity production and exchange for profit accumulation. While it is recognised that Baudrillard's critique of capitalism is in some ways trenchant, it is argued that it cannot support and direct radical political action. The thesis then focusses on Baudrillard's attempt to construct an alternative account of the development of capitalism as three distinct 'orders of simulacra' or regimes of signification. Baudrillard's genealogy, and his notion of postmodern capitalism as being the latest order of simulacra, is then contrasted with David Harvey's Marxist aetiology of contemporary capitalism. The thesis discusses Baudrillard's contention, based on his particular account of capitalism as a social and cultural formation, that capitalism has shifted from being based on the production of commodities to being based on the reproduction and circulation of signs. This discussion is illustrated by referring to concrete examples of simulation derived from conservation and the heritage industry. The thesis argues that Baudrillard's main theoretical strength is his avoidance of reductionism but that he effectively replaces economistic reductionism with a 'semiotic' reductionism. This critique of Baudrillard's genealogy of simulacra forms the basis of a 'case study' of Baudrillard's writings on fashion. Ranging from Baudrillard's early neo-Marxist to his later work, the discussion of fashion demonstrates that, for Baudrillard, fashion is a privileged locus within capitalism, an exemplar of the relation between commodity exchange and signification. Baudrillard's mature conception of fashion as a pure combinatoriality of signs without referent to an anterior reality is then contrasted with the Marxist influenced work of Dick Hebdige and Angela McRobbie's writings on fashion and identity. It is argued that Baudrillard's depiction, although powerful, results in a dismissal of human agency which effectively places him in a quietist political position. It is also argued that Baudrillard's overly totalising later work on fashion should be read as that of reductionist structuralist rather than that of a postmodern nihilist. In concluding, the thesis argues that Baudrillard is a critical thinker who is worthy of serious consideration. It will contend that Baudrillard's work should not be read as a fundamental challenge to Marxism but as an adjunct to its critical project, and that Baudrillard's critique of political economy and orthodox Marxism can be absorbed into the Marxist tradition as a corrective to economistic reductionism. It is suggested that this is an opportunity to demonstrate how signification is, in fact, essential to capitalist exchange and profit accumulation. Finally, the thesis suggests that Baudrillard's critique offers Marxism an opportunity to develop its critical categories by accepting that forms and modes of signification are as fundamental to continuing production of human societies as purely economic practices.

## **Candidate's Statement**

### **Objectives**

My objectives in researching and writing this thesis are primarily to present a critical exposition of Baudrillard's work on signification and political economy and contrast it with Marxist work in the same and related areas. From this, the thesis then aims to develop an essentially Marxist critique of Baudrillard's writings that does not simply reject his work out of hand and which concludes by arguing that Baudrillard's work offers new theoretical possibilities to the Marxist critical project.

### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Chris Pawling and Martin Jourdain and their invaluable contribution to clarifying the direction of this thesis through feedback and discussion. I should also wish to acknowledge the assistance, forbearance and support of Kaye and Jonathan Horsfield. In addition, I should also like to acknowledge the more indirect but very palpable assistance of Joe Reynolds, Frank Hamill and Rik Martin in particular

A complete bibliography is appended after the main text of this thesis.

## Introduction: Jean Baudrillard - *Enfant Terrible* and *Eminence Grise*

Jean Baudrillard is a stocky man of something under medium height. He was born in the Ardennes, Champagne region of France in 1929. Baudrillard's parents were civil servants from a peasant family, and Baudrillard was the first member of his family to go to university. He likes to wear brown and smokes roll-ups. His hobbies include photography and going to the movies. He has a passion for Alfa Romeo cars and concerns about his increasing girth. Transcriptions of interviews suggest an approachable and affable man who is generous with his time and the Beaujolais nouveau. Baudrillard, unlike the late Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, does not insist on the right to edit interviews, and the Baudrillard of interviews and seminars is often diffident and tentative in putting forward his views. Baudrillard the writer, however, is an iconoclast, a provocateur, a maverick. He is perhaps the most notoriously uncompromising of all postmodern theorists. Baudrillard at seventy is still an *enfant terrible* as well as an *eminence grise* of postmodern or 'post-Marxist' communication and cultural theory.

Baudrillard has lived and worked during a period in which France moved decisively from being a largely agrarian economy to becoming a leading industrial/commercial economic power. Baudrillard's location within the political context of the post war 'modernisation' of France, however, is often overlooked by his English and American readers, and should not be forgotten. Like a number of other young intellectuals, Baudrillard was radicalised by his opposition to France's brutal attempts to repress Algeria's anti-colonial rebellion. However, the collapse of France's colonial empire and the failure of the Fourth Republic took place against the back ground of increasing economic success. In *A History of Modern France*,

Alfred Cobban describes this success by referring to the impact of the economic strategy drawn up and implemented by the *Commissariat du Plan*:

**“From 1947 to 1951 the equivalent of some £2,300 million was invested in railways, electrical power plants, coal, shipping, petroleum refineries, and various lesser industries. Hydro-electric plants, which in 1919 had produced only fifteen, in 1951 produced forty milliards of kilowatts. Coal and steel recovered the level of 1929. The number of tractors on the land was multiplied by five over the pre-war figure. In 1939 sixty percent of French imports had been paid for by exports: the comparable figure for 1951 was eighty per cent. By 1954 the productivity of fifteen of the twenty main industries had passed that of the boom year of 1929.” [Cobban 1965, pg 219]**

In the context of this powerful economic recovery, Baudrillard's early development as a theorist could be characterised as being informed by the tensions between post war economic prosperity and its discontents and the decline of the Communist Party as a new radical left agenda began to take shape. A political agenda which emerged as young intellectuals reacted to what they felt to be a situation in which economic renewal was not leading to changes in an authoritarian and restrictive social order. As a result, a *gauchiste* political and cultural avant-garde pitted itself against what it saw as the inadequate orthodoxies of the French Communist and Socialist parties as much as the technocratic capitalism fostered by the centre-right in a conflict which came to a head in the Parisian street battles of May 1968.

This tradition of oppositional cultural politics, running from the Dadaists and the Surrealist movement through to the Situationists and *gauchiste* groups and such 'post-structuralists' writer/activists as Michael Foucault and Felix Guattari, has been an important factor in the course of twentieth century French political history,

and it is within this tradition that we must locate Jean Baudrillard. In the collection of interviews "Baudrillard Live" he describes his career as moving from Marxism, via situationism to what he calls a 'metaleptic'<sup>1</sup> position. Baudrillard has increasingly taken on an oppositional role: he has been, and remains, anti-capitalist; he has conducted long polemics against orthodox Marxism, semiotics and psychoanalysis; and he dared to attack Michael Foucault in *Forget Foucault* just at the time Foucault was consolidating his pre-eminent position within the French intelligentsia.

Baudrillard has never tired of being an 'outsider', someone who operates from marginal positions. This outsider/'trickster' role has meant that he has embroiled himself in controversy, including his attacks on the established French left and on French feminist theory, which have been detrimental and remain detrimental to his standing. However, despite stubbornly attempting to remain outside of academia and to remain a subversive figure, Baudrillard is increasingly becoming an *eminence grise*, he is recognised as an important figure, perhaps the most important figure, in debates about the nature of 'postmodern' culture and communications: Jean Baudrillard is now very much an institution, a major feature that must be negotiated for those who are attempting to explore critically the terrain of postmodern capitalism.

Baudrillard's his reputation among his anglophone readers is now such that his positions are sometimes conflated with postmodern theory *per se* in British and American work on postmodernism and postmodernity. For Neville Wakefield, Baudrillard's work is the conceptual epicentre of postmodernism. Wakefield

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<sup>1</sup> This word is used to suggest a position based on the endless substitution of one thing for another, a process which for Baudrillard one sign is displaced by another which is then displaced by another, etc. - the Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines 'metaleptic' as "a figure mentioned by Quintilian consisting in the metonymical substitution of one word for another which is itself figurative". This definition, as we will see, neatly summarises Baudrillard's ontological anti-realism and preoccupation with the combination and circulation of signs (simulacra).

presents Baudrillard's work as the (postmodern) negation of Marxism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, ethnology, and sociology. In contrast to my understanding of Baudrillard as a left theorist trying to develop an alternative to Marxist critiques of capitalism, Wakefield reads Baudrillard's work, particularly *Simulations*, as a discourse informed by, and informing, a nihilism even more virulent than that of Nietzsche's. In Baudrillard's world, or at least in Wakefield's version of it, the social itself has imploded into itself, collapsing into an undifferentiated, aleatory circulation of signs in a process that annuls the possibility of real historical change. It will be seen that such a position effectively undermines any theoretical basis for radical political intervention as well as - if this position is an accurate index of contemporary society - any basis for a revolutionary or even reformist leftist politics. Worse than this, the sheer proliferation of signs and images, the ungrounded procession of simulacra results in an aseptic parody of a *lebenswelt* from which all trace of reality, the final referent of all critical discourse, has been banished.

The sign and the 'real' of the social, which Wakefield/Baudrillard treat as the most precious of our ontological assumptions asphyxiate in the (simulated) non-atmosphere of Baudrillardian 'hyperreality'. Wakefield's Baudrillard threatens our orders of meaning: he targets established cultural and social analysis as well as assumptions about the role of communications and the media in contemporary Western society. Whereas Baudrillard's rival, Michel Foucault, carried out a project of methodological renewal for the human sciences and related disciplines, Baudrillard's work, according to Wakefield, sets out to demolish them and then play among their ruins. Wakefield describes Baudrillard as a "cuckoo in the nest"

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threatening:

**"not only to deprive the habitants of sustenance but in the process to destroy the nest itself. Metaphors of exorcism and cathexis become ever more import to [Baudrillard's] work as the guru role that was both self-appointed and adopted - as the "evil demon of the image", the ideological Jacques Cousteau of the New York Intelligentsia", "a prophet of the apocalypse" - increasingly cast him as a sort of Kurtz to be confronted at the end of the river of withering signifiers." [Wakefield 1990, pg2]**

For Wakefield, Baudrillard is analogous to Conrad's Kurtz, a sort of postmodern Tiresias figure who has examined our constructions of meaning, our dialectics, our overviews, and found them wanting. Baudrillard's work deals with the end of an order of meaning, an order that was based on the assumption that signs are securely attached - whether by convention or ontology - to their referents, and that these signs can be exchanged for the real in much the same way as money is exchanged for commodities. In semiotics, the sign, comprising the signifier (SR) or material form of a sign and its mental content or concept, the signified (SD), guarantee access to the real, to a referent standing "behind" the sign. The sign, a convention governed artificial entity, exists as that which substitutes for something, as that construct which gives access to an anterior natural reality.

These premises, for Wakefield, still inform semiotics and the Marxist and psychoanalytical structuralist methodologies developed amongst others by Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes and the early Baudrillard. The basic premise of these approaches is that signs - by whatever means - are ideological precisely because they are taken as giving unproblematic access to an ontologically anterior, 'real', naturally occurring order of meaning or *doxa*. The fundamental

critique of ideology put forward by these writers is that these signs constitute a false conception of the individual's relation to an order of meaning which appears to be natural, and to which we have an unmediated access through signs which are umbically connected to this reality. Against this doxalogical approach, these writers argue that signs are artificial constructs: they are the products of the conventions that govern their formal nature and their function. Signs cannot function as signs without being 'artificial', without being a construct that 'stands in place of' some other entity. Theorists such as Barthes, following the premises of Ferdinand des Saussure's structural linguistics, heavily foreground the radical artificiality of signs, regarding them as constructs governed by convention rather than any relation to a pre-given reality. Their work suggests that signs are ontologically troubling: they are entities with their own material reality (signifiers), which informs the production and circulation of social meaning, but that they also exist as substitutes for something else (referents). The presence of a sign is always in some respect the absence or displacement of its referent. However, because a sign's existence as a sign is predicated on some other, not present entity, it is fair to say that signs are ontologically incomplete - and while, as Barthes and Lacan have repeatedly stressed, they to some extent 'construct' meaning, they depend ultimately for their existence on object that are beyond them and that cannot be ontologically reduced to a mere effect of signification. In a sense, signs are 'completed' in the real; their referents guarantee or underwrite their meaning (signifieds), just as a state's gold reserves once underwrote its national currency.

Baudrillard, or at least the Baudrillard Wakefield alludes to as the **"evil demon of the image"**, begins from the assumption that signs no longer refer to any 'real' referent. In this he breaks with the semiotic tradition which regarded signs as

convention governed constructs, but constructs that ultimately relate to an anterior reality. Baudrillard regards signs as 'floating': a condition in which signs are no longer ontologically connected to referents that were once the ultimate source of their meanings. Signs proliferate: increasingly sophisticated electronic media reproduce a plenitude of signifiers that are not related to referents. Television, cinema, radio, multi-media home computers, magazines, newspapers, advertising images, all serve as the channels, the terminals for hooking us up to what Baudrillard sees as a free-floating, groundless "procession of simulacra". The sign, for Baudrillard of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* and *Simulations*, is no longer an entity that is dependent on a referent, it is no longer ontologically incomplete - it has become a simulation, a copy without original, which circulates in the postmodern condition of 'hyperreality'. In Wakefield's reading of Baudrillard's theory of signification, a sort of anti-semiotics, the sign within postmodern capitalism is a simulacra that is no longer dependent on its referent, it no longer stands in the place of another object: the sign is complete in itself as a pure simulation which has no relation to any 'real' referent. Paradoxically, this 'completion' of the sign is an ontological loss, the loss of the real: it is the point at which the sign no longer has, or needs, any contact with an objective 'real' world anterior to signification.

Wakefield is, I believe, accurate in his depiction of the later Baudrillard's rejection of established semiotics, but he uses it to support a skewed reading of Baudrillard's work from the mid 1970s to early 1980s. Wakefield does not take account of the way in which Baudrillard's thought has evolved nor does it address the publishing history of Baudrillard's works in English. He homes in too closely on Baudrillard the nihilistic controversialist, the oppositional figure, and does not take account of way in which Baudrillard career has its genesis in an attempt to produce

a structuralist, neo-Marxist semiotics capable of analysing the role of consumption as a creator of identity and meaning. Wakefield's Baudrillard has not evolved, not changed positions, not developed his thought. This means that Wakefield's view of Baudrillard is not informed by any critical reflection on the order of publication of Baudrillard's work in English. English readers of Baudrillard, it must be stressed, have not seen his work appear in its original order of publication, and this has meant that his English speaking readership have read the early Baudrillard through the filter of the later Baudrillard rather being able to follow the process of his development as a theorist. Later texts by Baudrillard such as *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), *Forget Foucault* (1975), *Simulations* (1981) and *The Ecstasy of Communications* (1987) have all been published in English before the early texts *The Object System* (1968), *The Consumer Society* (1970) and *The Mirror of Production* (1972)<sup>2</sup> - a book which has only been published in English by a small American publishing house. This situation reflects the impact of works such as *Symbolic Exchange and Death* and *Simulations* on Baudrillard's anglophone readers, but it neglects the importance of the neo-Marxist phase of Baudrillard's career. While Baudrillard at the time of writing *The System of Objects* and *The Consumer Society* was a relatively obscure figure, another French theorist who was trying to bring about a theoretically viable synthesis of Marxism, semiotics and psychoanalysis, it is becoming evident that his early work forms a valuable contribution to the Marxist tradition. Baudrillard did not start to abandon an essentially Marxist theoretical perspective until *The Mirror of Production* which was published in 1972. On reading this book, it becomes apparent just how far Baudrillard had moved from the Barthes influenced semiotic case studies of *The System of Objects* towards a position which led to his sustained critical attack on

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<sup>2</sup> All the dates given above refer to the year in which the French versions of these texts were published. However, it should be noted that for quotations the year of publication given is that of

Marxism, *but still from within the camp of the left.*

The issue of Baudrillard's publishing history and bibliography in English is one which is worthy of further investigation. It would have been far harder for Neville Wakefield to characterise Baudrillard as the quintessential postmodern nihilist, and by extension to reduce the complex matrix of positions and practices that constitute postmodernism to a nihilism, if Baudrillard's Marxist origins had been better known. Wakefield's Baudrillard is a pure event, something with no history, no determinants. The 'real' Jean Baudrillard is actually situated in a given historical conjuncture, his work attempts to 'read' that conjuncture, to make sense of it, to analyse it. Baudrillard's work, while definitely having an iconoclastic thrust, are not simply postmodern exercises in the demolition of the categories of critical theory, they are a challenge, a call to produce new formulations of the role of communications and culture in late or postmodern capitalist society. Baudrillard's work is a contribution to critical theory, an attempt to analyse the role of communications within our society and how communications relate to the social, cultural and economic functioning of contemporary society.

It is as a critical theorist rather than as a nihilist *enfant terrible* that Jean Baudrillard's work should be read. Reading Baudrillard in such a fashion is intended as a corrective to the focus on Baudrillard as nihilist which permeates the Wakefield's account of Baudrillard's theorising, and which can also be encountered in Douglas Kellner's *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*. This book offers a synoptic account of Baudrillard's work from 1968 to the late 19980s, and although it is very comprehensive, it presents Baudrillard as an

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the English version of the text in question.

essentially right-wing aristocratic nihilist, yet another ex-leftist denouncing his former beliefs. Although Baudrillard's attacks on orthodox Marxism are well known, his political position, it must be stressed, is one which is on the left. Baudrillard is scathing about capitalism, and characterises it as that which is responsible for the displacement of the real by a combinatory of signs that have no anterior referent. Capital is the villain of Baudrillard's writings, and his criticisms of 'left' political positions have reflected his view that they underestimate the power and ferocity of capitalism. Having said that, it will be argued later in this thesis that Baudrillard's conception of capitalism as a vast combinatory of simulacra is one that, in his hands at least, precludes any possibility of challenging the dominance of capital.

The basic argument of this thesis is that Baudrillard's work contains a trenchant critique of commodity capitalism that cannot be dismissed out of hand. It will suggest, however, that while Baudrillard's critique of postmodern capitalist society is suggestive and in some ways a useful corrective to economic versions of Marxism, it actually reaches an aporia by presenting a capitalism which cannot be politically challenged. Baudrillard's work will be therefore considered as an important - although flawed - critique of capitalism. The first chapter of this thesis will first examine Baudrillard's attempt to 'liberate' radical theory from what he regards as a conceptual complicity with capitalism as articulated by the discourse of political economy. It will look at how Baudrillard began to develop a critique of the tenets of political economy, and the relation of signification to political economy, that rejected the economism that he regarded as pervading much of orthodox Marxism. In order to define Baudrillard's later theoretical position as clearly as possible, this chapter will examine the Marxist critique of orthodox political economy as a prelude to an account of Baudrillard's own account of commodity capitalism

which is based on arguing that the use value and economic exchange value of commodities are analogous to their cultural sign value and their sign exchange value.

Baudrillard, it will be contended, regards signification as fundamental to the constitution of the commodity form. The chapter will show how Baudrillard developed a thoroughgoing critique of the notion of use value, which he regards as being analogous to the 'signified' in semiotic theory in that they are both regarded as the 'real' or ontologically privileged aspect of the commodity or sign. I then look in some detail at Baudrillard's attempt to transcend what he took to be the ontological essentialism of Marxism in favour of an anti-realist - but still materialist - ontology of the commodity which regards the **"structure of the sign"** as being **"at the very heart of the commodity form"** [Ed. Poster 1988, pg 79] while suggesting that Baudrillard fatally confers ontological realism with essentialism. I shall also argue that Baudrillard's account of the commodity as a medium or system of communication is an important addition to critical theory and a useful corrective to wholly economic interpretations of the commodity and its fundamental importance to capitalist exchange.

The next chapter will focus more on Baudrillard's split with Marxism and his development of an alternative account of capitalism which is based on what could be called 'modes of signification' rather than modes and social relations of production. Baudrillard's account of the development of capitalism as three distinct orders of simulacra will be set in context by contrasting it with David Harvey's Marxist account of the development of a postmodern capitalism which is heavily dependent on deploying signs to promote commodity circulation and capital accumulation. I

then suggest that Harvey's aetiology of postmodern capitalism will then be shown to underestimate the importance of signification in contemporary capitalist societies while presenting economic processes and the 'natural' categories of time and space as forming the privileged ground of the social. This approach, it will be argued, is based on a Kantian ontological schema that conflates cultural and 'natural' categories in a 'realist' attempt to provide a grounding for human experience. In contrast, Baudrillard's concept of postmodern capitalism as the latest of three order of simulacra, three discrete orders of signification, will be detailed as an alternative to the orthodox Marxist conception of capitalism as being economically derived. Attention will be paid to Baudrillard's contention that capitalism has shifted from being based on the production of commodities to the reproduction of commodities as sign-objects, the reproduction of simulacra or signs with no anterior referent but the model or code that governs their reproduction. In the course of this discussion, concrete examples of simulation derived from conservation and the heritage industry will be considered. The chapter will argue that Baudrillard's main strength is his avoidance of economism but that he effectively marginalises the economic to the extent that his analysis effectively displaces economistic reductionism with a 'semiotic' reductionism. Baudrillard's theory of simulacra will then be evaluated against a Marxist conception of the role and limited autonomy of signification and its impact on commodity exchange in contemporary capitalism, which acknowledges the limitations of essentialism while avoiding Baudrillard's theoretical tendency towards an unchecked valorisation of the sign.

The critique of Baudrillard's conception of the successive orders of capitalism outlined in Chapter Two will form the basis for Chapter Three's case study of Baudrillard's work on fashion from his early neo-Marxist writings to the 'postmodern'

theorising of works such as *Symbolic Exchange and Death* and *Simulations*. The chapter will start by outlining Baudrillard's approach to fashion by considering how his particular form of materialism informs the discussions of fashion that appear throughout his work. Although Baudrillard's theoretical approach to fashion in *The System of Objects* has changed considerably by the time *The Consumer Society* was published, these neo-Marxist texts analyse fashion primarily in terms of signification. These analytical approaches to fashion will be discussed at length and applied to examples from car manufacture and marketing to show how the car in 1950s America became, and remains, a sign-form and how as such it has entered the arena of fashion - which for Baudrillard is a privileged locus of commodity/sign exchange. A critical discussion of Baudrillard's genealogy of simulacra as applied to will then act as an introduction to a critical exposition of Baudrillard's mature theorising on fashion. It will be argued that the analysis of fashion in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* - an analysis which can be considered the apogee of Baudrillard's work on this subject - is based on an amalgamation of the differing theoretical perspectives on fashion that feature in Baudrillard's early neo-Marxist writings. It will be suggested that the fusion of the two conceptions of fashion is the basis for Baudrillard's later analysis of fashion as an aleatory combinatory of simulacra, a semiurgy that no longer relates to economic practices or any other form of 'real' anterior referent.

Following this, the chapter will contrast Baudrillard's approach with Dick Hebdige's Marxist influenced approach to analysing fashion as a signifying practice, and suggest that Hebdige's account is superior to Baudrillard's in that it presents fashion as a (potential) arena for contestation, a locus for cultural politics - an advantage that is shared by Angela McRobbie's writings on fashion and youth

identity. The chapter will then evaluate Baudrillard's theorising about fashion, arguing that its anti-humanism has resulted in a dismissal of human agency which further locks Baudrillard into a politically quietist position. Finally, the chapter will then argue that Baudrillard's later work on fashion allows him to be re-evaluated as a reductionist structuralist as opposed to a postmodern nihilist, that the criticisms that he launched against the totalising logic of Michel Foucault's concept of power can also be applied to Baudrillard's notions of life within an all encompassing combinatoriality of simulacra.

However, despite the criticisms of Baudrillard's work put forward in this chapter, the conclusion of this thesis will return to its central argument that Baudrillard is a critical thinker who is worthy of serious and sustained consideration. I shall suggest that by reading Baudrillard's work against its fundamental tenets can be useful to developing an essentially Marxist conception of postmodern capitalism. Baudrillard, it will be argued, must be read as not a fundamental challenge to Marxism, but, as Susan Willis reads him, as an adjunct to Marxism's critical project. The conclusion will argue that Baudrillard's critique of political economy and orthodox Marxism can be co-opted into the Marxist tradition as a corrective to economistic reductionism. It will be presented as providing an opportunity to demonstrate not the 'relative autonomy' of signification but the fact that signification is essential to capitalist exchange and profit accumulation and that it is more accurate to talk of a 'semio-economic' base for the social and cultural infra-structure than a purely economic base. This Baudrillard inspired critique of Marxist economism suggests that there is potential for Marxism to develop its critical categories by accepting that modes and forms of signification are as fundamental to the continuing production of human societies as any and all economic practices.

This thesis will attempt to be as even handed as is possible, Baudrillard's criticisms of political economy and Marxist positions will be presented as robustly as the critique of Baudrillard's work that is contained in this thesis, which is an attempt to look at Baudrillard as a critical thinker, an idiosyncratic presence within contemporary leftist theory. This approach is deliberate - after a career which has spanned some forty years, it is time that the fervour that has marked the reception of Baudrillard's work in America and England should begin to give way to attempts to assess the value, flaws and potential for further development of Baudrillard's extraordinary body of work.

## Chapter 1: Baudrillard, Marxism and Political Economy

This chapter will closely examine Baudrillard's radical critique of political economy, a critique that denies that orthodox Marxism presents a position outside the formal logic of meaning of liberal bourgeoisie political economy, and insists that Marxism fundamentally accepts the theoretical horizons of capitalist economics. In doing so, this chapter will give a definition of political economy, describe the Marxist critique of political economy, and then show how Baudrillard criticises this approach to political economy. The chapter will consider whether Baudrillard provides an important new approach to understand the formal co-incidence of commodity exchange and signification in advanced capitalist society, and also discuss the important limitations of his theoretical work in providing the grounds for establishing a new radical, anti-capitalist praxis. As importantly, it will also examine Baudrillard's contention that Marxism as a social theory has neglected the crucial importance of signification in critically understanding the current nature of political economy. It will be argued here that Baudrillard's early contribution to the critique of orthodox political economy should be read as an important but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to transcend the horizons of orthodox Marxism in an attempt to establish a new basis for the criticism of capitalist society and its discontents. This discussion will be followed by an assessment of whether Baudrillard has actually created an effective alternative to Marxist interpretations of political economy, one which offers a better approach to understanding the relations between social and economic exchange systems and the creation of meaning in contemporary society than those put forward by theorists working within the Marxist tradition. This chapter will close by indicating how Baudrillard's writings on political economy provide the framework within which he developed the key theoretical

concepts that inform his controversial account of the production and reproduction of meaning through signification within the contemporary social order and its predecessors.

The category of 'political economy' remains fundamental to both Marxist and liberal bourgeois attempts to understand the nature of modern society and the development of the capitalist economic order. In *Global Formation: Structures of the World-Economy*, Christopher Chase-Dunn offers a concise definition of political economy:

**"Economics and politics are not really separate phenomena despite the needs of academic disciplines to maintain their boundaries. Political economy is the study of the interaction and interdependence between economic and political activities. We cannot understand any social system without knowing how both power and production are organised. [Chase-Dunn 1989, pg 113]**

Political economy is therefore concerned with the relations between the modes of production and exchange and the political organisation of society. The very phrase 'political economy' implicitly acknowledges that it is the study of how the process of ensuring the means of subsistence (economic activity) is regulated and ordered in human society. It acknowledges that, as Chase-Dunn states, the political and the economic form a couplet, and that their separation is merely an analytical convenience,. The way in which any regime of material production guarantees subsistence, either through exchange or through direct production of the means of subsistence, is a major arena in which power is exercised in any given social order. In capitalist society political power regulates the relations between worker and capitalist, producer and consumer to the extent that to talk about economic matters

is always to talk about power relations and *vice versa*.

Political power and economic 'development' enjoy, as Chase-Dunn suggests, a reciprocal relationship in which developments in the economic realm affect the relations of struggle which comprise the political arena. The development of a capitalist economy in Western Europe and North America was certainly informed by the shift of power away from an entrenched nobility towards the mercantile bourgeoisie. However, this shift of political power, culminating in the liberal bourgeoisie revolutions of 1848, was made possible by the development of new technics and social relations of production, which generated a decisive movement away from land as the privileged form of capital and source of social status and power. The economic and political always walk hand in hand through history; the economic is always mediated through the social, and the social is always informed by the nature of the prevailing economic system. However, the two terms in the couplet are not of equal value, and although there is a reciprocity between the economic and the social, the economic is the privileged term in the couplet of 'political economy'. This privileging of the economic reflects the deep-seated conviction amongst orthodox political economists and their orthodox Marxist critics that the ultimate dynamic in shaping human society is the economic order, which is regarded as the essential term, the ontological ground and catalyst of change and development, the very engine of historical and social development. However, although political economy explicitly links the economic and social as indivisible in actuality, orthodox political economists accept the capitalist economic order as a given, as being a horizon beyond which political economy would not, and could not, pass. It is for this reason that in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Frederick Engels described political economy as being " **the theoretical analysis**

**of modern bourgeois society" [Marx 1976, pg 46].** For Marx and Engels, and for Baudrillard, political economy was, and is, an analysis of capitalist bourgeois society that is also an ideological justification for that society. Political economy provided not a means for accounting for the development of industrial capitalism, but it also implicitly provided a justification, a legitimisation, for a society increasingly dominated by the capitalist mode of production and exchange.

For Marx, Engels and other critics of orthodox political economy writing from within the Marxist tradition, one of the main charges against political economy is its insistence on founding all economic and social/political orders on the notion of an individual subject which is always already ontologically anterior to any given social order. The hero of the discourse of orthodox political economy is a rational human subject endowed with needs which can only be met through the rationally calculated appropriation and consumption of certain objects. Orthodox political economy contends that the rational, autonomous subject can only produce and consume within the confines of existing social conditions, while insisting that these conditions are the result of a myriad of individual subjects coming together in order to ensure that they have the capacity to produce enough to meet their rationally identified needs. For orthodox political economy, society is merely an aggregate of individuals, it has no dynamic of its own, and as such it is ultimately a reflection, and magnification, of the qualities of the individual human subject. The 19<sup>th</sup> century French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon is attacked in Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* for being essentially an apologist for an individualist conception of political economy. Proudhon's view of political economy fully replicates the individualist ideology that Marx regarded as permeating the work of orthodox political economists in the tradition of Adam Smith:

**"Since a very large number of the things I need occur in nature only in moderate quantities, or even not at all, I am forced to assist in the production of what I lack. And as I cannot set my hand to so many things I shall propose to other men [sic], my collaborators in various functions, to cede to me a part of their products in exchange for mine." [Marx 1978, pg 25]**

Proudhon's political economy is based on arrangements negotiated by essentially free subjects who come together to exchange their products in order to acquire goods that they cannot themselves find or produce. It will be seen that this view of society is one regulated by some sort of implicit contract between productive beings that make rational assessments of how to acquire the means of subsistence by forming productive alliances which benefit all parties. No shades of exploitation, no shadow of the acquisition of surplus value, no traces of class inequality, mar this liberal idyll in which the rationally apprehended and rationally fulfilled needs of each and all provide the economic basis of the social fabric. For Proudhon, 'man' is the essential category of political economy, and 'man' is understood a human subject rationally seeking to fulfil 'his' needs. The given, autonomous human subject, endowed with reason and free-will, is the starting point of orthodox political economy, which regards society as being merely an aggregate of individual subjects whose essential nature is something that in some fashion determines the nature of society, rather than as something which is determined by a particular social and cultural order.

The Marxist critique of political economy is centred on a challenge to the idea that the 'free' human subject is, through 'his' association with 'his' fellows, the ultimate source of the social order. In the *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx brusquely dismisses the notion of the

productive individual as the starting point of economic analysis by insisting that **“the individual and isolated hunter or fisherman, with whom Smith and Ricardo begin, is one of the unimaginative fantasies of eighteenth century romances a la Robinson Crusoe”** [Marx 1976, pg 8]. Marx then goes on to insist that the individual is not in any way anterior to society, and that the notion of a productive, consuming individual makes no sense outside of the social contexts, the power relations, that determine the way in which individuals produce and consume:

**“Man [sic] is a *zoon politikon* in the most literal sense, not only a social animal, but an animal that can be individuated only within society.**

**Production by an isolated individual outside society - a rare event, which may well occur when a civilized person who already possesses the force of society within himself dynamically is accidentally cast into the wilderness - is just as preposterous as the development of language without individuals living together and talking to one another. [Marx 1976, pg 10]**

The starting point of the Marxist critique of political economy, then, is its attack on the notion of the subject as being that which informs the nature of society, a notion which is counterpoised to idea that the social is that which ultimately informs the nature of the subject. The Marxist critique of political economy is predicated on its refusal to regard the subject as anything other than socially determined - in fact, the subject is not regarded as the cause or source of society but as an effect, a product, of society. The subject is dethroned, it loses its position as the centre of all experience, and the ultimate source of social and economic meaning. Frederick Engels gives a summary of this position in *Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

**“It is not the consciousness of men [sic] that determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness.”**

**[Marx 1976, pg 49]**

The human “species being”, the essential nature of humanity as the collective producer of its *lebenswelt*, is not something which is ontologically prior to society, but is something that exists only through society. For Marx and Engels, human beings can only fulfil their needs, can only manifest their ‘species being’, their dynamic and productive nature, through and by virtue of the social. It is the collectivity, the ensemble of economic and social relations, that allows humanity to manifest its essential characteristic as the animal that is capable of producing, of manufacturing its own environment. Against the liberal bourgeois individualism of orthodox political economy, Marx and Engels posit the social, the collective as equally the source of all true human values *and* the perversion of those values by capitalist exploitation.

This dichotomy between ‘true’ human values and the values promoted by capitalist exchange can be perceived at its starkest in the dichotomy that defines the nature of commodity and commodity exchange under industrial capitalism. For Marx, a commodity is both its exchange value and its use value: exchange value is what a given object is worth in exchange for other objects or services, while use value can be defined as the utility of a given object, the capacity of an object to satisfy human needs. The exchange value of, say, a packet of cereal is measured by its cost, its value in an exchange system governed by abstract monetary values, while its use value lies in its nutritional value, its ability to satisfy the subject’s ‘need’ to eat. In the Marxist tradition exchange value is parasitic on use value; the utility of any commodified object is obscured by its exchange value, which is always privileged as a source of profit, and therefore capital accumulation, within capitalist society. Capitalism valorises exchange value at the expense of use value. Those

qualities of the object that relate to, and fulfil human needs are, within capitalist society, given a value that is secondary to the exchange value of the object. In response to this, the Marxist critical tradition has argued that the notion of use value must be restored if human beings are to escape the reified relationship created by capitalism, relationships in which people are alienated, estranged, from their own needs as human beings.

The importance of the reified commodity form for Marxist critical theory is confirmed by Gyorgi Lukacs' work on the commodity as the **“central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects” [Lukacs 1971, pg 83]**. For Lukacs, the commodity was not just an object in a process of exchange, it was a translation of real social relations into an objectivised form, a form which denied the object's origin from within those social relations, and its use by the people defined by those relations. A reified object took on a new quality, its own objectivity displaced its source and role in the system of production and consumption that define human society. Lukacs defines the reified object in these terms:

**“The essence of commodity structure has often been pointed out. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity’, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.” [Lukacs 1971, pg 83]**

In other words, a commodity exists only because of the relation between the people who produce, trade and consume that commodity. The commodity has a social origin, it is not a natural, given fact, it is a product, the results of specific acts of production undertaken by specific human beings in specific circumstances.

However, the reified commodity, the commodity of exchange value presents itself

as being divorced from specific human needs and specific lived social relations, and objectifies itself in a way that eclipses its origins in the social activity of human labour and consumption. The reified object could be described as concrete ideology, an object that hides its origins in the human social relationships. The reified object is not simply an object, but is, according to Lukacs, a demand that all human needs should be reduced to, and satisfied by, the exchange of reified commodities:

**“Reification requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange. The separation of the producer from his means of production, the dissolution and destruction of all ‘natural’ production units, etc., and all the social and the social and economic conditions necessary for the emergence of modern capitalism tend to replace ‘natural’ relations more plainly by rationally reified relations. “The social relations between individuals in the performance of their labour,” Marx observed with reference to pre-capitalist societies, “appear at all events as their own personal relations, and are not disguised under the shape of social relations between the products of labour.”” [Lukacs 1971, pg 91]**

Exchange value has become the measure of everything, the means by which all human needs are satisfied through the consumption of objects reduced to the commodity form. Those ‘natural’ social relations pertaining in societies living outside of capitalism, are, according to Lukacs, falling victim to commodification and Reification. The ultimate victim of this process are people who no longer fulfil their needs directly through personally controlled production and exchange, but who are now forced to seek the satisfaction of their needs solely through capitalist forms of commodity exchange. This process, for Lukacs, is one in which ‘reality’ that is reified under the forms of a ‘phantom objectivity’, and the truth of objects circulating

in human societies in response to human needs is utterly displaced.

The process of Reification, and the corresponding alienation of the commodity from human social relations, can also be understood as resulting from the increasing abstraction of commodified objects, an abstraction in which exchange value displaces and distorts the truth of use value. In this process a commodity equals its abstract exchange value, and this becomes the measure of any given object, no matter what its intrinsic qualities may or may not be. In his essay *Commodification of Reality* [Ed Kellner 1994], Steven Best argues that the emergence of an industrial capitalism based on commodity exchange has led to a profound ontological deterioration in the status of objects. Best argues that objects are no longer valued for themselves, for their own qualities and nature, but as fantasies of 'need' fulfilment embodied in the commodified object. This process, Best contends, has its origins in the way in which the actual qualities of a commodified object are displaced in favour of a universal, abstract exchange value, which is itself only the vehicle for the circulation of capital:

**“Once the circulation of capital has been abstracted from sensuous needs and qualities, from any social referent (the referent has become uprooted, privatized, fragmented among competing private interests), once it extends beyond the factories to penetrate all cultural interpersonal relations, it has a profound corruptive and distorting effect. The inversion that occurs in the economy, and which affects the whole of social life, is then directly transferred to the cultural and personal realm *where commodity fantasy begins.*”** [Ed Kellner 1994, pg 45 - author's italics]

Best's arguments link semiology and political economy, they present use value as the final referent, the undistorted truth, underlying the debased nature of the

commodified object. Indeed, the commodified object is really nothing except the fact it is not any other commodity, just as signs and their components are defined in post-Saussurean linguistics and semiology as having a negative ontology - that they are themselves only because they are not something else; they have no positive qualities, but are defined only by their difference to other signs. The commodity is what it is simply because it is not any other of a limitless number of other commodities, and therefore it has no identity except in its relation of difference to other commodities. It is therefore ideally suited to being appropriated through commodity fantasies because it has no inherent qualities which can resist its appropriation by ideologically generated fantasies of social differentiation and/or satisfaction through commodity acquisition and consumption. The social referent, the finality or *telos* of an object, which is grounded in its use value is eroded and displaced by a parasitic exchange which limits that object to being a mere moment in the general circulation of capital.

In contrast to Best's elegy for use value as the 'true' reality of commodities and bulwark against commodity fantasy, the American Marxist Susan Willis makes a remarkable attempt in her essay *Unwrapping Use Value* to present use value as the dialectical negation of exchange value and its capacity to displace the qualities of objects through the process of abstraction by commodification. Willis presents a short genealogy of the commodity which is very useful for understanding the intimate relationship between signification and exchange value. Willis implicitly draws on the semiotic notion of differentiation between signs, and the components of signs, through their difference alone. As we have seen, a sign has no positive ontological base in its own right. It does not have any sort of essence - its identity as a particular sign therefore stems from its relation to, its difference from, all other

signs. A sign is dependent on differentiation, without differentiation, signs could not exist. Willis argues that specific, fetishisable commodities only exist because they are differentiated from other commodities through the signifiatory process of advertising, and cites Quaker Oats as an early example of this process:

**“Prior to the 1890s, there was no advertising for what would later become Quaker Oats, because if such advertising had existed, it could only have promoted oats in general. The point of advertising is the designation of the commodity (and, by extension, the consumer) as a discrete unit.” [Willis 1991, pg 2]**

The marketing of a given brand of a specific commodity requires that that commodity is designated as being different to commodities that are generically identical. In *The Object System*, Baudrillard refers to the distinction between a Citroen 2CV and the short-lived French luxury car the Facel-Vega [**Baudrillard 1996, pg 140**] as a distinction between commodities which share the same function are totally differentiated in terms of their marketing, and their availability and their social cachet. All cars have the same use value, however the 2CV and the Facel-Vega have totally disparate exchange values, and these values do not stem from anything intrinsic to the cars, but are generated by advertising, by fashion, by the codes of signification that govern their place in the circulation of exchange value. Therefore signification is an essential element in contemporary political economy, it is that which allows commodities to be differentiated so that they can acquire an exchange value that annuls their intrinsic differences, and assigns an abstract value, an identity, in a social and cultural order dominated by the circulation of commodities and capital.

Willis argues that exchange value has developed the ability to displace use

value completely through the emergence of what she calls the “hyper-commodity” [Willis 1991, pg 2]. The “hyper-commodity” can best be described as a commodity which is the sum total of a series of semiotically related objects. The commodity has become abstracted to the point that it is not a thing in itself, but exists only as a series of signs that relate discrete products. Willis gives the example of the “California Raisins” as being a typical “hyper-commodity”:

**“Where raisins from California were once marketed according to specific brand-name identities such as “Sun Maid”, they are now promoted as the “California Raisins” and embodied in a band of wrinkly “dudes” with skinny arms and legs who chant “I Heard it Through the Grapevine” while soaking up the California sun. “California Raisins” do not represent a return to the pre-brand name generic commodity, but rather the hyper-commodity” whose connection to rock music and black culture heroes precipitates a vast array of spin-off products, from grotesque dolls to beach towels emblazoned with the “Raisins””. [Willis 1991, pg 2]**

Instead of buying a single thing Willis argues that we now buy commodities that consist of semiotically generated relations between a range of discrete products. We do not simply buy and consume the “California Raisins” as dried fruit marketed through a range of advertising goods, we actually consume the abstract idea or the concept that links a growing number of items. At the time of writing, the two most note worthy hyper-commodities in Britain are the Spice Girls and the Teletubbies. Neither of these two phenomena can be understood as being anything except semiotically generated hyper-commodities: both the Spice Girls and the Teletubbies are the conceptual nexus around which the marketing and consumption of an array of discrete products (although no comments on the quality of these products will be made here) ranging from videos to toys. The most interesting characteristic of the

hyper-commodity is the way in which it grows more fetishised as it becomes more and more abstract. Against this process of abstracted commodity fetishisation, Willis pits concrete use value against exchange value as its antithesis, and the ground on which resistance to the ongoing commodification of all objects and experiences can be built.

Willis sees use value as that which is the truth of objects, the non-reified, non-alienated form of the commodity, the form under which the commodity is restored to its status as an object capable of satisfying (non-alienated) human needs. Use value is the spectre haunting exchange value: it is the antithesis, the point at which exchange value is confronted by a radically antithetical form, one that cannot be absorbed into exchange value. For Willis, the truth - or 'value' - of use value is that it implies the possibility of entering into a realm of non-reified, non-alienated relations that transcend the established strictures of capitalist social relations:

**“The Marxian account of commodity fetishism does not represent a negation of use value. Rather, it demonstrates that use value is dialectically referred to in our fetishized objects of consumption, just as all of mass culture is haunted by the desire for non-alienated social relations.” [Willis 1991, pg 13]**

Using Marxist inspired forms of critical analysis as a tool for understanding the importance of use-value as that essential part of the capitalist system of exchange and exploitation which is absolutely vital to that system, but is at the same time the point that offers the possibility of dialectically transcending the capitalist system of exchange and exploitation; a system that Willis understands as being predicated on a process in which objects are ontologically debased to take their place in a false regime of exploitative exchange.

However, while offering one of the most incisive and thoughtful critiques of the relationship between signification and political economy in advanced capitalist society, Willis also makes an early essentially favourable reference to Baudrillard's attempt to find a radical, alternative to the use value as the point of departure for a theoretical critique of capitalism. Willis remains wedded to a project of recovering use value as the true form of objects, as that around which non-reified, non-alienated social practices and relations can be constructed. Her tactics are a counter-valorisation of use value in the face of exchange value, while Baudrillard scorns the notion of value as a product of capitalist signification and economic exchange:

**“According to Baudrillard, the construction of value under capitalism, which derives from the relationship of exchange value to use value, is homologous to the system of signification defined by Saussure, where meaning is born of the relationship of signifier to signified. This defines a more fundamental unity between consciousness and capitalism than obtains in Lukacs’ theory of Reification. For Baudrillard, the logic of capitalism is the logic of meaning.” [Willis 1991, pg 18]**

Baudrillard does not accept the distinction which lies at the heart of the Marxist critique of political economy, he does not accept that use value is anterior to exchange value. Unlike Willis, Baudrillard has no desire to redeem use value, use value is, for Baudrillard, part and parcel of capitalism; it is not its dialectical antithesis of exchange value, but rather its ‘alibi’, its legitimisation. Willis rightly notes that in taking this position Baudrillard **“challenges us to think outside of value altogether” [Willis 1991, pg 19]**, to attempt to think beyond the horizon established by the privileged capitalist couplet of signification and political economy.

This point is echoed by Etienne Balibar in his *The Philosophy of Marx* which characterises Baudrillard as a rebellious child of Marx, one who **“stands Marx on his head”** [Balibar 1995, pg 79] when he seeks to develop a critique of use value which attacks what he regards as a **“fetishism of use value”** [Balibar 1995, pg 76]. This is an important theoretical development in so far as it draws attention to the limits of use value. Use value is that which can form a benign essence of objects in the orthodox Marxist tradition; use value can appear as the *quiditas* or truth of an object that is hidden or distorted by exchange value. Baudrillard’s work offers a corrective to this view by reminding us that objects will always be exchanged and that they will always have a dimension of their being which can be described as ‘use value’ because all social and cultural orders are dependent on the exchange of socially meaningful objects. Exchange value per se is not a bad thing in itself, it is the capitalist form of exchange value which displaces the particular qualities of individual objects in favour of a universal, abstract form of exchange value which is geared to capital accumulation. Baudrillard begins *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* by establishing the relationship between use value, exchange value, sign value and what he calls **“the logic of symbolic exchange”** [Ed. Poster, pg 57]. The relationship between what Baudrillard designates as sign value and use value is familiar to us from the Marxist critique of political economy:

**“Here the advertising process of conferring value transmutes use goods (*biens d’usage*) into sign values. Here technique and knowledge are divorced from their objective practice and recovered by the “cultural system” of differentiation. It is thus the extended field of consumption, in the sense we have given it of production, systems and the interplay of signs. Of course, this field also includes the production of signs originating from economic**

exchange.” [Ed. Poster 1988, pg 58]

The sign value of a commodity is its value as an image, a sign, its place within the cultural system which bestows meaning (in the form of value) on objects. Use value, the range of things one can do with an object, is translated in cultural value by the processes of advertising and design. A commodity is a statement about its owner/user, and not an object whose value can be reduced to pure utility. This distinction between sign value and use value will be seen to be analogous to Lukacs and Willis' depiction of the commodity as a reified form, something which has been given a “phantom objectivity” or nature by means of its position within a combinatorial of sign and economic exchange values. Baudrillard rightly points out that the cultural value, the sign value of an object is privileged over and above its objective, technical qualities. The commodified object circulates in a cultural system from which all ambiguity and ambience have been removed, and which produces meaning through the exchange of commodities as sign values. Baudrillard's insistence on the importance of sign value provides

We have seen that Susan Willis attempted to redeem use value as the dialectical antithesis of both capitalist exchange value and those exploitative social relations informed by exchange value. However, Baudrillard, as we have seen, does not regard use value as being in any way ultimately antithetical to exchange value. Baudrillard argues that it is **“the logic of symbolic exchange”** rather than use value which represents an antithesis to both the notions of orthodox political economy and Marxism, which assume that any system of production and consumption, use and exchange must be based on a concept of value. Both orthodox political economists and Marxists locate the source of value in the relation of objects to human needs. Baudrillard pits his notion of symbolic exchange

against these two traditions, which he regards as being predicated on the assumption that the value of objects resides in their capacity to satisfy a range of needs which are integral to all human beings. Baudrillard does not accept that the ability to meet human needs is the source of any commodity's value. Value, for Baudrillard, is derived from the relation pertaining between the terms of a structured system, value is constituted by the relation between the elements of a given structure. In the case of commodities, their value comprises their economic value and sign exchange value understood as a relationship between elements in an overarching structure. The structure of capitalist semiotics is, according to Baudrillard, one in which signs relate in a manner that exemplifies capitalism's imperative to abstraction, reductionism and a notion of value as being positive, unambiguous, ubiquitous.

Chris Horrocks and Zoran Jevtic in *Baudrillard for Beginners* offer a particularly lucid description of why Baudrillard finds capitalism's regime of signification to be absolutely complicit in promoting capitalism as the horizon of all social meaning: **"Baudrillard now claims that the sign is an accomplice of capital. Why is this?**

- 1. Because it is an agent of abstraction.**
- 2. It universally reduces all potential and qualities of meaning. The meaning is "framed" when a signifier is tied to the signified.**
- 3. It excludes and discriminates. Once installed, a sign offers itself as a full value - positive, rational, exchangeable.**

**This is the rationality of the sign. Its rationality does NOT lie in the sign naming some exterior reality (a tree over there), but in its exclusion of ambivalence of non-resolution of meaning."** [Horrocks and Jevtic 1996, pg

43]

Baudrillard therefore sees the sign as the accomplice of capitalism, the structural reduction of the horizon of meaning. In taking this position, however, he attempts to move beyond the exchange value/use value dichotomy by claiming that symbolic exchange is the antithesis of use value, economic exchange value and sign value. He argues that sign exchange value, along with all other forms of value, faces one radical alterior term, the term of symbolic exchange, a term that he contends cannot be reduced to value or even its dialectical antithesis:

**“Precisely speaking, there is no symbolic ‘value’, there is only symbolic ‘exchange’, which defines itself precisely as something distinct from, and beyond value and code. All forms of value (object, commodity or sign) must be negated in order to inaugurate symbolic exchange. This is the radical rupture of the field of sign value.” [Ed. Poster 1988, pg 59]**

Baudrillard therefore pits symbolic exchange against the three forms of value established by capitalist commodity circulation. He does not attempt any form of counter-valorisation of use value, as this would be in Baudrillard’s terms remaining inside the horizons of capitalism’s value-based system, but posits symbolic exchange as a “rupture”, a point of separation from all forms of social exchange based on the notion of an underlying value. Whereas Susan Willis sought the dialectical negation of exchange value in use value, Baudrillard takes an anti-dialectical stand and maintains that the only way to negate capitalism is not by searching for a its dialectical transformation through one of its values, but to pose the radical otherness of a form of exchange which is not based on any form of value at all. As Willis rightly points out, in taking this step, Baudrillard is challenging us to **“think outside of value altogether” [Willis 1991, pg 19]** in describing his critique of political economy as being **“by far the most radical, the most utopian,**

**and the most difficult to imagine how it might be translated into daily-life social practice” [Willis 1991, pg 18].** Baudrillard does not look for the dialectical antithesis of the capitalist system for hope, but counters it with a violent theoretical act in which capitalist forms of value are made to face not their dialectical negation but the absolute otherness of symbolic exchange.

The otherness of symbolic exchange, when compared to the capitalist (and Marxist) valorisation of value, can be grasped by considering Mike Gane’s claim that **“Baudrillard’s work, from the start, is marked by a very radical attack on any theory, like Marcuse’s, which postulates an identifiable set of essential, innocent, human needs which can be thrown as a challenge against the modern system” [Gane 1991, pg 87].** Symbolic exchange is not geared to fulfilling any pre-given human needs, and cannot be reduced to any notion of need satisfaction. Baudrillard’s critique of needs is based on a deconstruction of the formal qualities of commodity understood as an entity which exists only within the systems of sign and economic exchange. He argues that both use value and the 'signified' (or conceptual element of a sign) are homologous in that each exists to provide an 'alibi' or justification for exchange value and the signifier (the material form) when they are understood as being the privileged term, the term governing the 'reality' of the commodity form:

**"In the correlation:**

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{EV} \quad \text{Sr} \\ \text{---} = \text{---} \\ \text{UV} \quad \text{Sd} \end{array}$$

**use value and signified do not have the same weight as exchange value and signifier respectively. Let us say that they have a tactical value; whereas exchange value and signifier have a strategic value. The system is organized**

**along the lines of a functional but hierarchized bipolarity. Absolute pre-eminence redounds to exchange value and the signifier. Use value and needs are only an effect of exchange value. Signified (and referent) are only an effect of the signifier (we will return to this point later). Neither is an autonomous reality, one that either exchange value or the signifier would express or translate in their code. At bottom they are only simulation models, produced by the play of exchange value and signifiers. They provide signifiers with the guarantee of the real, the lived, the concrete; they are the guarantee of an objective reality, for which, however, at the same moment, these systems qua systems substitute their own total logic." [Ed. Poster 1988, pgs 70 - 71]**

Here Baudrillard's argument is that use value and signified do not constitute a reality which should be regarded as being transcendent to both exchange value and signifier. Exchange value and the signifier, are for Baudrillard, the privileged forms of the commodity, forms that do not ultimately refer to the anterior reality of use value and the signified. He contends that both use value and signified are 'simulations', an effect, rather than the cause, of the circulation of commodities (signifiers) as the exchange of sign values. Baudrillard contends that what has been taken for the real in Marxist critical discourse is not the primary ontological ground, a base upon which the superstructures of exchange value and signified are erected, but is in fact only an effect, a simulation model produced by the circulation of commodities under the forms of exchange value and sign value. The ontological axiomatics of Marxism is inverted by Baudrillard who does not seek meaning in the mute, anterior world of the 'real', but in the circulation of objects understood as exchange value and as signifiers that have severed their ontological ties with their signifiers. The social world for Baudrillard becomes an effect of signification

practices and not their cause; it is that which is produced only by the circulation of commodities which generate a 'reality' effect. Baudrillard argues that there is no reality to be discovered behind exchange value and the signified, they are not the real, not that which is expressed through the forms of exchange value and the signifier. The only way to discover a realm of being beyond capitalism's structures is through the praxis of symbolic exchange, a praxis which he claims restores the enchantment of ambiguity and reciprocity to human exchange and social meaning.

At this point, Baudrillard breaks with any kind of realist ontology (but not ontological and epistemological materialism) and therefore breaks with the ontological axiomatics of orthodox Marxism. His theorising now deals with the world as being produced (or rather reproduced) through the play of simulations, signs - or more correctly, signifiers - that circulate without any umbilical link to their signifieds or any actual, concrete referents. The structure of the sign and the structure of the commodity have become one in a totalised system of commodified social exchange to which all meaning is subject. Here, Baudrillard attempts to surpass the critiques of Lukacs and Willis by insisting on the total nature of the simulation model that generates and dominates all forms of economic, social and cultural exchange. As Baudrillard points out, advanced capitalism rests on a welding together of the commodity form and the sign form, thereby reducing the horizon of signification to the horizon of commodity exchange. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard sets out the way in which the structures of the commodity form and the structure of the sign have formed a couplet:

**"It is because *the structure of the sign is at the very heart of the commodity form* that the commodity can take on, immediately, the effect of signification:**

not epiphenomenally, in excess of itself, as "message" or connotation, but because its very form establishes it as a total *medium*, as a *system of communication* administering all social exchange. Like the sign form, the commodity is a code managing the exchange of values. It makes little difference whether the contents of material production or the immaterial contents of signification are involved; it is the code that is determinant: the rules of the interplay of signifiers and exchange value." [Ed. Poster 1988, pg 79 - author's italics]

The commodity is not something that can be separated from signification; the commodity is a coded object, it circulates within a system governed by exchange values, and, like the sign, it is determined ultimately by its code, by the system of formal relations, that determine its nature as a commodity. Both the sign and the commodity form what Baudrillard calls " **a total medium**", a totalised form of social exchange, which cannot be transcended. Use value is not a potential antithetical element in the system of capitalist exchange, as Baudrillard contends, "**use value and the signified do not constitute an *elsewhere* with respect to the systems of the other two** [exchange value and the signifier]; **they are only their alibis**" [Ed. Poster 1988, pg 71 - my parenthesis]. There is nothing within the system of commodity exchange that can transcend the system, or act as a point of rupture within that system. Use values do not offer the potential for establishing non-reified social relations around them, they are a component of the closed system of meaning established by advanced capitalism.

Baudrillard's theoretical critique of the relation between commodity exchange and signification is more rigorous than its economistic Marxist counterparts as it insists that commodities are structured as signs, that they convey meanings which

are socially exchanged, and that this feature of the commodity is not an ideological addition to the commodity or any other form of false appearance, but is, in fact, essential to its nature, and allows for its social circulation. Objects will always have a dimension that is their exchange value, their movement between people in a given social order. Under capitalism, their exchange is reduced to that of being circulated as for commodities as the basis of profit accumulation. Baudrillard's insistence on the fact that objects can be exchanged as signs as well as economic goods is a necessary reminder that the economic is not the basis of the social, but an effect of the social, and that the social is always dependant on systems of exchange, which are themselves predicated on systems of signification.

Baudrillard's critique of economism is therefore a useful reminder of the primacy of the social over and against the economic. It is also one of the most thoroughgoing attempts to demonstrate how signifiatory structures substitute themselves for the exterior real by their very nature, signs are a form of simulation rather than any form of access to a transcendent reality; they form an ensemble of meaning that has its origins in the interplay of signs within the arena of the social, rather than from some pristine, anterior reality. The real, Baudrillard reminds us, is socially constructed rather than given, and that no element within a social system can appeal to an unmediated reality as its source. The pristine real that is the economic base of orthodox Marxism has transmuted into a ensemble of signifiatory, meaning generating relations. In the West, at least, it is arguably no longer a mechanism for securing individual and collective survival through production and exchange, but it is now a regime of meaning, an order of social relations produced, and reproduced, through both the processes of 'economic' production and the play of signification which are both equally essential to the commodity form and the circulation of the commodity as exchange value.

Advanced capitalism is based on the circulation of a commodities upon which all forms of meaning are inscribed. Lukacs' nightmare of total commodification of all experience and all social relations has come to pass in the form of an order of simulation that seems to be unchangeable. Baudrillard's early response to this is, as we have seen, to refuse to valorise meaning and to privilege a form of symbolic exchange that eschews value in an almost desperate theoretical challenge to the totalised hegemony of consumer capitalism. Symbolic exchange resists definition: it is the praxis of exchanging polyvalent meanings that are excluded from the sign and commodity form. Symbolic exchange makes no appeal to value or to meaning as it circulates in our society. It is purely other, a negation of commodity exchange, that Baudrillard argues cannot be incorporated in capitalist forms of semiotic and commodity exchange. Symbolic exchange is not a concept; it has no identity in itself, it remains the (deliberately) undefined term that haunts the formal perfection of sign and commodity exchange. Willis notes that symbolic exchange owes much to the work of Marcel Mauss on the function of the gift in so-called 'primitive' societies:

**"Baudrillard appeals to the work of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, whose elaboration of the gift ("*le don*") in primitive society offers an alternative to societies based, like our own, on accumulation rather than dispersal. Central to Mauss' description and to Baudrillard's analysis is the annual potlatch ceremony practised by the Kwakiutl Indians where accumulated wealth and possessions are not just redistributed but wholly used up. Baudrillard sees the potlatch as the basis for reciprocal social relations based on a form of exchange that destroys value. Baudrillard's term for such a dynamic is "symbolic exchange", which he alludes to as the anti-form of capitalism,**

**whose cursory and subtle manifestations might be glimpsed at unexpected moments even in consumer society. Baudrillard cites play, the spontaneous gift, destruction as pure loss, and symbolic reciprocity as examples of symbolic acts (Baudrillard, 1988: 93)." [Willis 1991, pg 19]**

Although Willis is right to say that symbolic exchange is **"somewhat inaccessible to discursive elaboration"** [Willis 1991, pg 19], it can be regarded as the non-dialectical negation of capitalism, that which is absolutely other to a social system dedicated to amassing value (capital) as an end in itself.

In *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*, Douglas Kellner cites *The Mirror of Production* in describing symbolic exchange as an increasingly generalised and ill-defined antithetical principle to what Baudrillard takes as the productivism of advanced capitalism, a principle which he regards as politically naive and perhaps dangerously close to a right-wing vitalism:

**"Baudrillard contrasts the abstraction, reduction and rationalization in productivist societies with 'the richness of symbolic exchange', and valorizes the latter over the former (MoP, p.45). In these and other passages, there is a nostalgia for the 'primitive', the pre-capitalist; and at least part of Baudrillard's theory of symbolic exchange derives from anthropological studies of exchange in 'primitive societies'. One might interpret his position at this point as a nostalgia for primitive communism, for a communal, ritualistic social order organized around symbolic exchange (and not production and the rest). In other passages, however, symbolic exchange becomes even more diverse and heterogeneous, as when, against Marx's anthropological emphasis on the primacy of labor and production in human life, Baudrillard valorizes a 'discharge with a pure waste, a symbolic**

discharge in Bataille's sense (pulsating, libidinal)... A gratuitous and festive energizing of the body's powers, a game with death, or the acting out of a desire (MoP, pp. 43-44). This would suggest that nonreproductive, 'pulsating' sex, exhibitionism, nonutilitarian waste and gratuitous violence serve as paradigms of 'symbolic exchange'." [Kellner 1989, pgs 44 - 45 - author's ellipses]

Kellner's animus towards Baudrillard is manifested in this passage, but it does indicate the weaknesses of the latter's position in respect to actual political practice. Like Foucault and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Baudrillard advocates, at this stage in his career, a left politics which does not regard the working class as the key radical or potentially radical group in society. At this point in his career, Baudrillard sought political change in what Kellner describes as the "**microspheres of everyday life**" [Kellner 1989, pg 46] and among socially marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities and the members of 'deviant' sub-cultures. Baudrillard does not offer any way of converting his theoretical insights into a political praxis that can do more than simply create 'symbolic' challenges to the capitalist annexation of all facets of human life. Baudrillard certainly argued that symbolic exchange is manifest among so-called 'primitive' peoples as a form of social exchange that is a type of pure expenditure, the refusal to accumulate value, a refusal to circulate objects and signs on the basis of their exchange value. It is, for the Baudrillard of *The Mirror of Production* and *Symbolic Exchange and Death* that which still haunts value accumulation in our society. The praxis of symbolic exchange is perhaps manifest in acts of 'senseless' destruction, acts that waste surplus accumulation rather than hoard it as 'capital' - the Situationist International and the Dutch pro-situ group the Provos tried to challenge capital on this level. The Provos, for instance, by giving away goods from shops in an attempt to negate their

commodity status. This form of challenge to capitalism is one which is, however, limited to a gesture that is purely negative, and does nothing to construct a lasting alternative to the capitalist social order.

Mike Gane points out that symbolic exchange is used by Baudrillard to attack a system of signification as simulation which increasingly precludes any opportunity for a critical attack on its system of meanings:

**"In a crucial gesture, at this point, Baudrillard opens a daring attack on the sign itself from the point of view of the symbolic order, for in the last resort it is the principle of ambivalence in the symbol that is the mortal enemy of the sign (which functions to transform everything into positive terms). It is not with respect to the existence of the real world, with its apparent ability to intervene as last resort, that the circle is to be broken, since the real world is not available (and is never available except as the myth of semiology itself). Only the symbolic, in its radical negation of the positive term, can act effectively as a counter to the 'formal correlation of the signifier and signified.'" [Gane 1991, pg 92]**

In the end, for Baudrillard, the sign is an instrument of tyranny, the tyranny of the capitalist regime of meaning based on signification, exchange value and accumulation. The one hope of breaking this tyranny comes from the possibility of the irruption of the ambivalent, auratic symbolic order into the formal systems of value exchange. Baudrillard concentrates on the formal qualities that govern the ontological status of objects, signs and exchange practices in consumer capitalism, rather than on the potential for the type of social revolution envisaged by orthodox Marxism. There is a desperate quality to the move of evoking symbolic exchange; it is perhaps too redolent of the last throw of the dice, of the last spasm of the

revolutionary project. Certainly, Willis is correct to point out the utopian, impractical nature of Baudrillard's attempt to contest the political economy of the sign, and it is extremely difficult to see how his writings could form part of a coherent political programme. However, Baudrillard's writings deliberately seek to frustrate being incorporated into any sort of programme, and as such they offer a sort of symbolic exchange to their reader, they offer ambivalence and ambiguity rather than a programmatic exposition of a pre-given position. In this they attempt a symbolic exchange based on negativity, on a refusal of a defining identity. Baudrillard refuses any attempt to define symbolic exchange, except as the negative principle combating the positivity of the sign form:

**"It is the symbolic that continues to haunt the sign, for in its total exclusion it never ceases to dismantle the formal correlation of Sr [signifier] and Sd [signified]. But the symbolic, whose virtuality of meaning, is so subversive of the sign, cannot, for this reason, be named except by allusion, by infraction (*effraction*). For signification, which names everything in terms of itself, can only speak the language of values and of the positivity of the sign." [Ed Poster 1988, pg 91]**

Baudrillard, it will be seen, conceives of the symbolic as the absolutely other to all forms of signification and value exchange. His theorising, which has often been condemned as offering no principle, or even hope, of transcending the social and cultural formation of capitalism, does include a theoretically powerful principle of opposition to the totalisation of meaning as capitalist forms of exchange under the form of signification. The symbolic resonates with the absence of given meaning, with the ambiguity of a type of exchange that cannot be reduced to an equation between the sign and commodity forms.

Baudrillard's challenge to capitalist signification is among the most thoroughgoing and most radical attempts to break the hegemony of value that determines social relations under consumer capitalism. Unfortunately, Baudrillard does not offer a theoretical assault on capitalism which is compatible with traditional Marxist praxis, and which is extremely weak at the level of practical day to day opposition to capitalist exploitation and oppression. Baudrillard gives no guidance on organisation and tactics, but he does depict well the total nature of the current regime of meaning and its absolute complicity with commodity exchange, while attempting to find the point of negation of commodity exchange. Baudrillard's genuine achievement is to have shown that capitalism is an order of signification as well as an order of economic relations, that its 'appearance' as an ensemble of signs is as vital to its functioning as the 'base' of productive forces and the social relations of production. Like, Georges Bataille whose arguments in favour of an economy of expenditure, prodigality and waste are based on the notion of a solar economy that always already produces to excess, Baudrillard's arguments against value in itself seem less and less absurd in the face of what Michael Richardson has called **"the rapaciousness and sheer bankruptcy of an economy based on monetarist principles"** [Richardson 1994, pg 96]. In posing the implicit question of the value of value, Baudrillard at least gives us occasion to consider the misery that is inflicted on human beings in the name of value, its signification, its exchange and its accumulation.

We have seen in this chapter how Baudrillard developed a new critique of political economy which moved him away from a neo-Marxist position towards the radical theorising of his later work. In the course of his critique of political economy, Baudrillard moved decisively away from a Marxist position based on the valorisation

of use value, and insisted that use value was merely the 'alibi' of exchange value, just as the signified is not the privileged term in the signifier/signified couplet, but merely the 'alibi' of the signifier, its justification as the expression of a reality that transcends it. Baudrillard's break from Marxism comes with his advocacy of symbolic exchange as the negation of value *per se*, as opposed to the Marxist project of privileging use value over and above exchange value. Instead of the distinctions and dichotomies of Marxism, use value and exchange value, base and superstructure, production and consumption, Baudrillard concludes his critique of political economy with the introduction of his concept of signification as simulation. As he writes in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, **"the process of signification is, at bottom, nothing but a gigantic simulation model of meaning [Ed. Poster 1988, pg 91.** From this point, Baudrillard begins to elaborate his theory of signification as simulation, and to develop the genealogy of orders of simulacra that are among the best known aspects of his work for an English speaking audience. Baudrillard's concept of meaning as simulation could only be developed within the context of his critique of political economy and its dependence on simulation, although I shall argue that in developing his concept of signification as 'simulation', Baudrillard contradicts the position that he put forward in *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* and *The Mirror of Production*. Having rejected the economic as the base of the social, Baudrillard then moved on to consider history as the shift in the orders of simulation that governed meaning in different historical epochs in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* and *Simulations*. The next chapter will examine Baudrillard's genealogy of simulacra, and show how it develops the anti-realist ontology that dominates his critique of sign and exchange value while continuing to retain the weaknesses of developing a radical theoretical critique without attempting to set out how that critique can become a form a political

praxis, a challenge that exists in the domain of everyday life and not simply as a theoretical project.

## Chapter 2: Beyond Political Economy - The Orders of Simulation

In the preceding chapter Baudrillard's view of the relations between political economy and its Marxist critique of political economy were outlined and used to support the argument that although his position on political economy is one predicated on a rejection of the fundamental tenets of orthodox Marxism, it is one which continues to offer a useful point of departure for radical theory. We have seen that for Susan Willis, **"the Marxian account of commodity fetishism is not a negation of use value"** [Willis 1991, pg 13], a statement with which Baudrillard would agree, given that he regards Marxism as being complicit with the tenets of political economy, as being its theoretical 'mirror'. He perceives Marxism as that which represents the ongoing theoretical development of the essential tenets of political economy, rather than that which instigates a radical conceptual break with the capitalist regime of economic and signficatory exchange. For Baudrillard, Marxism does not contest the fundamental ontological and epistemological assumptions of capitalist political economy; it shares with political economy a logic which assumes that 'men' who possess needs and the capacity to produce the means of satisfying those needs, produce goods to meet their needs, and because no one 'man' can produce enough to satisfy all 'his' needs alone, they exchange the goods they have produced as commodities in exchange transactions. Baudrillard regards the Marxist project of redeeming use value from capitalist mystification as a project which is based on the acceptance of the fundamental logic or 'code' of political economy, a logic of production and exchange which he wants to reject, contest and transcend. In *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard writes that:

**"In a work, man is not only quantitatively exploited as a productive force by the system of capitalist political economy, but also metaphysically**

overdetermined as a producer by the *code* of political economy. In the last instance, the system rationalises its power here. *And in this Marxism assists the cunning of capital. It convinces men that they are alienated as labor power, thus censoring the much more radical hypothesis that they might be alienated as labor power, as the "inalienable" power of creating value by their labor.*" [Baudrillard 1975, pg 31 - all italics the author's]

Baudrillard's position is that Marxism is complicit with capitalism at a theoretical level; that it shares the 'code' of political economy, and does not negate but reproduces its categories in an inverted form. Marxism, for Baudrillard, does not challenge the 'truth' of political economy. Like political economy, it is predicated on an understanding of human society which is grounded on the concept of a human essence manifested in how 'mankind' labours to produce 'value'. Marxism, in all its guises, does not, therefore, offer a radical negation of the "simulation model" that Baudrillard sees as informing both liberal bourgeoisie thought and its Marxist critique. Although Marxists would refute this, and consider that Baudrillard's depiction of Marxism to be a caricature, in his terms, Marxism shares the same rationalist assumptions and the same valorisation of value and the notion of an essential 'reality' that informs the theoretical discourse of political economy. Marxism is therefore only a theoretical 'mirroring' of bourgeoisie political economy, and not the source of a radical challenge to the hegemony of capitalist assumptions.

However, despite Baudrillard's rejection of Marxism because of what he regards as its conceptual conservatism, it is clear that the Marxist theoretical model is very much his point of departure. Perhaps Baudrillard's theoretical project could therefore said to be based on a reversal of the epistemological and ontological

schema of Marxism in an "inversion" of the tenets of Marxism that is analogous to Marx's inversion of Hegelian idealism. Signification and political economy form a couplet in Baudrillard's early work, two terms whose relationship defines the nature of capitalism as a universal system of exchange and a universal system of meaning. However, in Baudrillard's work, these terms are not equals. Their relation is not one of simple 'difference', but one which is governed by a hierarchical positioning of the two terms in a distinction that privileges one term over the other. Whereas the theorists of political economy and those theorists working within the Marxist tradition valorise production, the economic, over the 'superstructure' of culture and the play of signification, Baudrillard privileges signification over and above political economy in a reversal of epistemological and ontological structures of orthodox Marxist theory. In his view, human societies are sign-societies: they are formed from the play of signs within radically different regimes of signification. For Baudrillard the history, or rather genealogy, of capitalist development is always one which is ultimately governed by shifts in what could be termed the 'mode of signification'.

If Baudrillard's complex theorising about the relationship between political economy and signification could be reduced to a single position, it would be that the logic of capitalist economic exchange is analogous to the logic of signification; that signification is always already intrinsic to the structure of the commodity form and the mechanisms of capitalist commodity exchange. Indeed in *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard declares unequivocally that **"the structure of the sign is at the very heart of the commodity form"** [Ed Poster 1988, pg 78 - author's italics]. From the comparatively neglected *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* and *The Mirror of Production* to the later and

better-known *Symbolic Exchange and Death* and *Simulations*, Baudrillard argues that the circulation of objects within a capitalist economic order cannot be divorced from signification, and that the logic of signification is equivalent to the logic of capitalist commodity exchange. In these key texts, Baudrillard abandons any residual adherence to the epistemological and ontological nexus which informs the both discourse of political economy and its Marxist critique. His analysis of the emergence of capitalism and the social conditions of advanced capitalism is based on a notion of a general economy of exchange, which is predicated on the prevailing regime of signification. Baudrillard therefore argues against the orthodox Marxist view that signification is a superstructural process, one which is epistemologically and ontologically subordinate to the prevailing mode of production which forms society's economic base (a base which is itself ontologically grounded on the notion of an objective, transcendent material world). Instead of assigning signification to a secondary, superstructural role, Baudrillard argues that it is the crucial factor in informing the nature of culture and society, and that the prevailing mode of production, reproduction and consumption of signs is that which ultimately determines the social character of a given epoch.

In order to illustrate the difference between Baudrillard's theoretical position and that of Marxist social theory, this chapter will explore the contrast between Baudrillard's concept of the social which is predicated on a valorisation of signification with David Harvey's Marxist account of social and cultural development. It will focus on the key differences between the base/superstructure conception of historical progress and change advanced by David Harvey in his book *The Condition of Postmodernity* and Baudrillard's genealogy of regimes of signification (his "genealogy of simulacra") that features in the text *Symbolic*

*Exchange and Death and Simulations*. In the course of this chapter, it will be argued that Harvey puts forward a position which is predicated on ontological realism, on retaining a sense of a foundational reality which is determined by the relations of modes of production to an objective, material world. It will be contended that this is, for Harvey, a reality which exists independently of any representation of it; a reality which is the transcendent referent of any and all forms of signification. Harvey's ontology will be shown to rest on the notion of a real world with objective properties that exists prior to any representation of that world. Unlike Harvey and other Marxist theorists, Baudrillard does not regard signification as a 'superstructural' phenomenon, which is ultimately ontologically determined in the last instance by the processes of the economic base interacting with a foundational reality. It will be contended that Baudrillard's theorising about the nature of advanced capitalism is characterised by an 'anti-realist' approach to epistemology and ontology, a position that acknowledges the importance of signification within advanced capitalist society, while avoiding the problems of economism and the essentialist positing of an a human subject or an anterior 'reality' as the ground and referent of all signifiatory processes. This discussion will be followed by considering the epistemological and ontological issues that arise in both Baudrillard's and Harvey's accounts of the relation of signification to political economy within a mature capitalist society.

Realism here will be understood as the view that all social, cultural and economic phenomena are informed by an underlying reality, which determines their natures, effects and relations with each other. In its most basic form, this position can be stated as a belief that **“physical objects exist independently of being perceived”** [Flew 1979, pg 278]. Such a belief is usually takes the form of a

materialist approach to understanding the nature of reality, materialism has been cogently described as **“the doctrine that whatever exists is either matter, or entirely dependant on matter for its existence”** [Flew 1979, 205]. Transposing this doctrine to the study of signification, it takes the form that signs relate to referents which have an independent existence that cannot be reduced to an effect of signification. Such a view would claim that the referent is not reducible to the sign, and that it exists as a material entity endowed with its own objective reality. However, this position is far from unproblematic because the entire edifice of semiotics and discourse analysis built upon Ferdinand des Saussure’s structural linguistic is premised on the ontological separation of the sign and referent. There is no umbilical link between the sign and the referent, there is no ground for assuming that there is any way of passing from the order of the sign to the order of referent no matter whether which term is accepted as the privileged one. The distinction between the sign and its referent is implicit in C. S. Peirce’s definition of a sign as **“something which stands to somebody for something else, in some respect or capacity”** [Williamson 1978, pg 20]. This formulation acknowledges that a sign is not an extension of its referent, but an entity which displaces its referent in an act of signification which is paradoxically predicated on the notion that the referent must exist or be assumed to exist for something to stand in its place as a sign.

This something is usually something which is defined as having certain properties which are absolutely fundamental to constituting its character. It at this point that realism often becomes conflated with a form of essentialism, the belief that entities have certain essential characteristics that define their nature, and that their existence is in some way a manifestation of that essential nature. This concept

has its origins in the Western philosophical tradition that incorporates Plato's ontological doctrine of ideal forms, Aristotle's doctrine of essences as that which constitute a thing, and Kant's transcendent idealism. It is still the dominant tradition within Western ontology and epistemology (casting its influence on social sciences and critical theory), and I intend to show that its fundamental tenet of a transcendent reality has insidiously influenced Harvey to the extent that his Marxist materialism is based on a fundamentally Kantian epistemological and ontological schema. Simplifying massively, the meaning of any act of signification within the tradition of Western philosophy stems from its relationship to the pre-given real, which may be understood as an idealist non-phenomenal essence (whether constituted as a transcendent ideal form as in the various forms of Platonism or as the noumena, the *ding-am-sich*, of objects as in Kant or Schopenhauer's ontologies) or as a materialist, 'real' entity. Criticism in this tradition is based on exposing the way in which some signs have an incorrect relationship with the real, how they are not true to the essential real. These signs mystify, they hide rather than reveal the transcendent reality. In contrast, other signs are 'true' signs of transcendent reality, they reveal the actual, real state of things, and these signs are as privileged as 'false' signs are reviled. True understanding in this metaphysical tradition is based on the concept of delimiting statements that accord with the essential truth of things from those statements that do not accord with the truth understood as that which corresponds to the essential characteristics of reality.

The socially and politically conservative version of this doctrine is open to the criticism that it precludes any notion of social or cultural change by conflating the socio-economic realm with a pre-given and therefore unchangeable and unchangeable nature. The true real, the real understood as a pre-given source of

all things from molecules to signs in all their diversity, sets everything in stone: nothing can be changed because society rests on the unchangeable order of things, a reality which is itself underwritten by a supreme ontological principle such as 'nature' or 'God' For Plato the perfect society was in itself a sign of the existence of transcendent forms, a sign constituted by the conservative and repressive social project of ensuring that the whole of society lived in a way that accorded with the transcendent truth of things, the very source of all being. Although Platonic ontology was based on the descent of being through the great chain that bound the transcendent essential forms to such mundane entities as mud and slime, this conception of a graduated order of being can be found in an inverted form in some versions of Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Structuralism. Here, the real acts as a ground rather than as a transcendent essence, but the effect is similar in that there is a pronounced tendency in these disciplines for writers to adopt models of reality in which a base supports and informs a superstructure or manifest contents slyly refer to latent contents or content masks the meaning producing dynamics of form. The real is an hidden essence, an essence which can be brought to light by reading or decoding properly. This Platonic/Kantian ontological and epistemological schema is one that is based on the existence of a hidden real which has essential properties that define its nature.

Baudrillard rejects such a conception of materialism in his later work. He attempts to provide a non-foundational account of the effects of signification on contemporary society and the relation between signification and political economy. There is no 'really' real for Baudrillard, his conception of the world does not appeal to a reality that is hidden behind appearances, it a world in 'truth' is immanent rather than transcendental. Richard Harlan provides an interesting account of

Baudrillard's anti-realism which conflates an anti-realist position with idealism:

**“For Baudrillard, ‘the ‘real’ table does not exist. Like Plato or Hegel, he regards the concrete outside world as an illusion or secondary effect: ‘The empirical “object”, given in its contingency of form, color, material, function and discourse.... Is a myth.... It is nothing but the different types of relations and significations that converge, contradict themselves, and twist around it.’ Needless to say, this is a position of the very highest metaphysical idealism.”**

**[Harland 1987, pg 177 - author's ellipses]**

Or is it? From this passage alone it is clear that Baudrillard does not insist that 'mind' is in any way constitutive of reality. Therefore his position is not that of a classic idealist for whom 'mind' is that which posits a world which is ontologically dependent on its operations. Baudrillard's position is that objects are not 'real' but that relations, structures, and codes are real in the sense that they have an existence which is not dependent on the mind of a constitutive subject. In fact, these relations do much to constitute the subject in Baudrillard's view and they should be properly regarded as material, as that which is independent of any perception of them. The Marxist tradition argues that use value and exchange value constitute the ontological nature of the object as a item circulating within a given social order, while Baudrillard's claims that both use value and exchange value are not objective, material properties but conceptions of objects generated by structures. For Baudrillard, the structure of objects comprise their reality: a reality that is predicated on the relations between the different elements of an object. Baudrillard's ontology is therefore structuralist in that it attempts to displace orthodox Marxism's invocations of the density of the concrete, the quotidian materiality of the world, with a more abstract conception of reality as a series of structural relations. Baudrillard's more notorious claims about reality being

displaced by *hyppereality* (the combinatory of signs generated by contemporary media) can be read as a claim that 'real' or natural reality, the seeming solid matter of things, has been displaced by an order of the reproduction of signs in which the structural relations between signs becomes the ontological source of the objective condition of our times as opposed to the pre-given 'nature' of things. This is not an idealist position, but a form of highly abstract materialism, a materialism which ontologically privileges the structural (understood as a form of materiality) rather than primal matter. For Baudrillard, the 'real' table is the set of structural relations that define the table as a particular entity in a particular social and cultural context. He rejects an essentialist concept of matter, but this does not mean that Baudrillard is therefore in the idealist camp.

Baudrillard's structuralism allows him to account for signification and its relation to political economy without invoking a transcendent anterior reality as the foundation for his theorising. Structure is immanent in Baudrillard, it is that which comprises the world of social exchange and experience, it is that which comprises objects by means of the **"different types of relations and significations that converge, contradict themselves, and twist around [them]" [Harland 1987, pg177]**. Nothing is conceivable, in his terms, without structures that define the nature, social role and function of objects. These structures are part and parcel of everyday reality - they are that which through their own materiality make the materiality of our world possible. This conception of materialism is obviously light years away from the way in which orthodox Marxism conceives of materialism, but it is still very much a materialist position, albeit one which is anti-realist in that it does not cite a primal reality as its ontological foundation. Baudrillard's 'structuralism' does not imply essence of objects, they do not have a core of being,

a *ding am sich*, in their use value, the appropriation of which is the basis of social and cultural relations. As we have seen in Chapter Two, Baudrillard does not accept that use value is that which realises the truth of objects but is just another form of capitalist fetishism, an attempt to impose a single meaning on the multiple meanings engendered by the structural relations that comprise objects. The difference between Baudrillard's position and that of the orthodox Marxist tradition is best illustrated by comparing a Marxist account of the signification with the one offered by the later Baudrillard. David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* is a synoptic overtly Marxist treatment of cultural postmodernism and its relations to a social condition that he describes as "postmodernity". In this book, Harvey shows himself to be antagonistic to many of the premises of the theoretical positions articulated in France during the 1960s and 1970s which rejected Marxism as a liberatory philosophy, adopting an overtly critical stance towards the work of Baudrillard along with the work of other anti-Marxist radicals such as Michel Foucault and Jean-Francoise Lyotard. Harvey has developed a powerful and sometimes scathing Marxist critique of Lyotard's and Foucault's aversion to global or universal theorising, and their commitment to a politics that privileges local and specific struggles at the expense of any attempt to understand the relation of current political struggles to the socio-economic totality of advanced capitalism. This commitment to an understanding of advanced capitalism as a totality is shared by Baudrillard who always conceives of capitalism as a totality, a complete ensemble of social and signifiatory relations. However, in stark contrast to Baudrillard, Harvey's work retains a commitment to a base/superstructural model of Marxism, an ontological model which privileges the development of productive forces and the social relations of production (the economic base) as the 'motor' of history, an anterior material reality on which the whole of contemporary society is

constructed.

Harvey's account of cultural postmodernity is squarely within the tradition of orthodox Marxist theory. His work seeks to characterise history as a process in which the quest for capital accumulation acts as a spur to both technological development and the development of new social relations of production. It must be stressed that these developments are a reaction to the crises that are intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production and exchange. Modernity, for Harvey, is configured under the sign of Fordism: it is a socio-economic order based on the premise of rationally ordered mass production and mass consumption, a social order in which objects are produced and consumed with a view to increasing both individual and corporate wealth. If the hero of 19th century political economy was a lone 'Robinson Crusoe' exchanging those goods 'he' could not manufacture himself for some portion of 'his' surplus production, the hero of Fordism is the social mass, the collectivity being forged into new roles within a class-based society increasingly geared to fulfil all human needs through the mass production and consumption of goods, and indeed increasingly incapable of conceiving of any other way of meeting human needs except through the exchange of mass produced commodities. With the emergence of socio-economic modernity, the process that Lukacs characterised as 'reification' begins to dominate all experiences of social exchange as society learns **"to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange"** [Lukacs 1971, pg 91]. This distortion of human relations and displacement of properly human behaviour results from the reduction of all forms of social exchange to relations mediated by economic exchange values. Explicitly for Lukacs, and implicitly for Harvey, reification is as much a part of the tyranny of capital as class exploitation, and re-enforces the ideological legitimisation of capitalism by removing

even the possibility of an alternative of a society founded on other than capitalist principles and practices. Against class exploitation and the extreme alienation implicit in the reification of objects and people into economic commodities, commodities which are measured against their exchange value and not their use (or human) value, Harvey pits Marx as a thinker in the liberatory, emancipatory, and sometimes utopian line of critical thought which descended from the Enlightenment: **“Marx, who in many respects was a child of Enlightenment thought, sought to convert utopian thinking - the struggle for human beings to realize their ‘species being’ as he put it in his early works - into a materialist science by showing how universal human emancipation might emerge from the class-bound and evidently repressive, though contradictory logic of capitalist development. In so doing he focused on the working class as the agent of human liberation and emancipation precisely because it was the dominated class of capitalist society. Only when the direct producers were in control of their own destinies, he argued, could we hope to replace domination and repression by a realm of social freedom.”** [Harvey 1989, pgs 14 -15]

For Harvey, the Marxist project is the recuperation of the possibilities of human existence that have been displaced by capitalist society. The Marxist project is the recovery of a social reality which while being the dialectical negation of capitalism has been engendered by capitalist economic, social and cultural development. The emancipatory potential of capitalist society remains as its dialectical other: the permanent possibility of realising ways of non-exploitative relations of production and social exchange that ‘haunt’ postmodern capitalism’s cornucopia of representation, its flux of imagery, its aleatory and fantastical semiurgy.

Harvey conceives of postmodern capitalism as having its genesis in major

changes to the economic base which introduced new social relations of production as a response to the economic crisis that undermined the post-war economic settlement. This settlement was based on what Harvey describes as a 'Fordist' regime of production, a regime of production based on the austere 'rationality' of time and motion studies' principles of organising labour by breaking down productive processes into discrete tasks, and then organising the actions necessary to complete these tasks into what Harvey describes as **"component motions"** [Harvey 1989, pg 125]. As Harvey points out, F. W. Taylor's tract *The Principles of Scientific Management* promoted a division of labour aimed at maximising productivity while removing the labour process from artisanal control as far as the existing technology (and social technologies) of mass production permitted. However, Harvey also emphasises that Taylor's approach had its ancestry in the work of 19th century writers such as Ure and Babbage. The approach to organising labour for maximum productivity advocated by Taylor, Ure, Babbage et al. was consciously implemented by Henry Ford, in a praxis that linked organising the productive powers of his employees with defining their subjectivity. Fordism was for Harvey as much an ideological activity as a purely economic one. Harvey writes that the Italian Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci was among the first Marxist thinkers to perceive that Fordism was both an economic and an ideological entity:

**"The Italian communist leader Antonio Gramsci, languishing in one of Mussolini's jails some two decades later, drew exactly that implication. Americanism and Fordism, he noted in his "Prison Notebooks", amounted to 'the biggest collective effort to date to create, with unprecedented speed, and with a consciousness of purpose unmatched in history, a new type of worker and a new type of man.' The new methods of work 'are inseparable from a**

**specific mode of living and of thinking and feeling life.’ Questions of sexuality, the family, forms of moral coercion, of consumerism, and of state action were, in Gramsci’s view, all bound up with the search to forge a particular kind of worker ‘suited to the new type of work and productive process.’ ” [Harvey 1989, pg 126]**

Although Harvey acknowledges that Fordism was in its infancy as a socio-economic organisational principle in the 1920s, when Fordist production processes had been in situ for some two decades, Fordism became established as the key form of praxis for an age in which mass production meant mass consumption and the radical reshaping of everyday life to accommodate the incessant demands of capitalist political economy. Not only was management control of the work process intensified, but management began to look beyond the work place, and found that there was a need to install a discipline in life outside the factory, a need to school people in a new dual role, the role of being at once a worker and a consumer in order to ensure that this new hybrid creature of capitalism was properly endowed with an appropriate subjectivity, a subjectivity which would ensure maximum compliance with their new role in the developing political economy of capitalism.

Harvey depicts Fordism as the realisation that a new economic regime demanded a new socio-cultural regime, that economic modernisation instigated a process of social and cultural modernisation. He writes that:

**“What was so special about Ford (and what ultimately separates Fordism from Taylorism), was his vision, his explicit recognition that mass-production meant mass consumption, a new system of the reproduction of labour power, a new politics of labour control and management, a new aesthetics and psychology, in short, a new kind of rationalized, modernist, and populist**

**democratic society.” [Harvey 1989, pgs 125 - 126]**

Fordism is, for Harvey, the begetter of modernity, and therefore that which created the conditions from which postmodernity emerged. It should be understood as a hierarchical yet populist attempt to create a society in which social exchange has become equivalent to the production and consumption of mass produced goods. Modernity is the experience of how a fundamental shift in the social organisation of production informed a series of changes in the social and cultural spheres. In this Marxist account of the genesis of the capitalism of modernity, the economic base, the 'real' of productive forces and the social relations of production informed by those forces, is that which drives the process of capitalist development. The way in which the social, psychological and cultural effects of these changes within the economic base were registered is given particular attention by Harvey, but it is clear that he regards them as 'satellite' or secondary phenomena, as 'superstructural' changes that were determined by an ontologically more fundamental order of existence.

For Harvey, the capitalism of postmodernity is one in which the relative social and economic stability of Fordist capitalism is being displaced by a form of capitalism that is increasingly signified as pure becoming, a state of flux, an ungrounded admixture of signifiers freed from their signifieds and referents, which, for commentators such as Neville Wakefield and Jonathan Raban, do not rest on, and in fact preclude, any form of stable ontological foundation. Instead of the dialectical interplay between ephemerally and permanence that Harvey detects in cultural production of the modernist movements of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Harvey regards the culture of postmodernity, its order of representation, as being one in which on first sight there is no ontological

counterpoint to flux and ephemerally, no perduring socio-economic base or ontological foundation upon which the changing surfaces of postmodern capitalism rest. However, Harvey does not accept this evaluation of postmodernity: he maintains that the postmodern carnival of imagery is based upon, and mediates, the underlying realities of space and time, the two most fundamental categories of a half-occluded but stubbornly real and permanent world. Harvey is adamant that **“space and time are basic categories of human existence” [Harvey 1989, pg 201]**. The culture and social forms of postmodernity are constructed on these basic realities; they may, and do, distort them in ideologically loaded processes of signification, but space and time remain among the basic categories of ontological foundations of our experience. Madan Sarup regards the interplay between capital, space and time, and the effects of that interplay informed by the process of ‘time-space compression’ in which capitalism seeks to annul space in order to cut the ‘turn-over time’ for capital accumulation (a process in which space is ontologically reduced to time), on our experience of space and time as characterising the capitalism of postmodernity:

**“According to Harvey, the relations between money, space and time are interlocking sources of social power. He makes frequent reference to the concept of ‘time-space compression’, the processes that so revolutionise the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter how we represent the world to ourselves. The word ‘compression’ is used to convey the point that the history of capitalism has been characterised by a speed-up in the pace of life.” [Sarup 1996, pg 99]**

The ontologically ungrounded, ephemeral world of postmodern capitalism is one in which the world’s objective dimensions of space and time are being compressed as a result of capitalism’s inherent need to speed up the time it takes for profit to result

from capital outlay. Under postmodern capitalism, space is being constantly compressed into time governed processes of production and consumption that Harvey regards as altering the way in which human beings now perceive and represent space and time. This process rests on the impact of the reality of human beings' technics and social relations of production and the fundamental ontological categories of the world and the human *lebenswelt*. For Harvey, despite its own ideological mystifications, the development of capitalism is ultimately grounded on ontological realities, realities of production and consumption, and realities about the physical properties of the world. These realities transcend any and all representations of them, and endure through all the social and cultural mutations that accompany capitalist development.

Cultural postmodernism is, for Harvey, the result of the way in which the processes of production, exchange and consumption inform the physical condition of our world and the representations we make of that world. Despite the fact that Harvey regards semiotic processes as being secondary to the dialectical interplay of the realities of capitalist accumulation, space and time, he pays close attention to forms of cultural production in a symptomatic reading of the cultural condition of postmodern capitalism. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, he links the way in which postmodern capitalism promotes, what for it are, **“the values and virtues of instantaneity “ [Harvey 1989, pg 286]** in a society characterised by what Harvey calls:

**“The dynamics of a throwaway society, as writers like Alvin Toffler (1970) dubbed it, [which] began to become evident during the 1960s. It meant more than just throwing away produced goods (creating a monumental waste-disposal problem), but also being able to throwaway values, lifestyles, stable**

**relationships, and attachments to things, buildings, places, people, and received ways of doing and being.” [Harvey 1989, pg 286]**

As space is converted into shorter and shorter ‘turn-over’ times, Harvey contends that our experience is one in which all stable social relationships and all enduring relations with a given environment come under assault in a world that is a flux of discourses, images and sensations in an aleatory circulation in which any sense of permanence has been utterly displaced. In this world, objects are constantly stripped of associations, their accretions of meanings, as these are displaced by other, equally transient, meanings. Such a world can appear to have no depths; it becomes a play of surface presences, signs without referents, each of which will be displaced by another in a circulation of advertising and media images which seems a very close relation of both Susan Willis’ ‘hypercommodity’ and Baudrillard’s hyperreal procession of simulacra:

**“Advertising, moreover, is no longer built around the idea of informing or promoting in the ordinary sense, but is increasingly geared to manipulating in the ordinary sense, but is increasingly geared to manipulating desires and tastes through images that may or may not have anything to do with the product to be sold (see plate 1.6). If we stripped modern advertising of direct reference to the three themes of money, sex and power there would be very little left. Furthermore, images have, in a sense, themselves become commodities.” [Harvey 1989, pg 287]**

Harvey regards advertising as having jettisoned its overt referent. Advertising, for Harvey, is no longer a process in which the inherent qualities of any given commodity are signified to an audience of potential consumers, it is now a process of signification which refers to a social identity constructed from the privileged signifieds of “sex, money and power”, which is presented to audiences as though

such an identity was in fact a given. Harvey's approach to theorising advertising as a process of signification could well be described as 'Kantian', in that it posits the notion of a transient semiurgy which is based on far more stable and perduring or *noumenal* forms of reality. For Harvey, signification is always representation, whether it is the ideological mystifications of advertising or modern and postmodern art's attempts to find new ways of representing our relations to space and time, signification is always a process in which an anterior referent is translated in sign form. That referent is of a more permanent nature or has a greater ontological value than the signifiers to which it refers.

Harvey therefore reads postmodern capitalism's semiurgy as being posited on more fundamental realities, which themselves translated into the discourses and imagineries of advertising to suggest that there is some enduring thing that underlies the cornucopia of imagery that characterises our epoch:

**"But images have other functions to perform. Corporations, governments, political and intellectual leaders, all value a stable (though dynamic) image as part of their aura of authority and power. The mediazation of politics has now become all pervasive. This becomes, in effect, the fleeting, superficial and illusory means whereby an individualistic society of transients sets forth its nostalgia for common values. The production and marketing of such images of permanence and power require considerable sophistication, because the continuity and stability of the image have to be retained while stressing the adaptability, flexibility and dynamism of whoever or whatever is being imaged."** [Harvey 1989, pg 288]

Harvey's reading of the imaginary of postmodern capitalism is one in which the invariant features of capitalism, its axiomatics of production, reproduction,

exchange and capital accumulation, mediate the flow of media images and use it to project an ideology in which everything will be, and always already has, been changed except the economic basis of the capitalist mode of production. Images of perduring power and authority not only market a given organisation or individual, but, in Harvey's terms, they are also powerful reminders of the relative stability of capitalist categories and how the contradictions between those categories serve to generate the socio-economic instability that characterises Harvey's reading of postmodern capitalism.

Such images are very much akin to what Jacques Lacan described as "*points des caption*" which anchor a given chain of signifiers in place. For Lacan, points des caption served to suture together signifiers, while Harvey's capitalist imaginary of permanence serves to hold together the transient images of the postmodern semiurgy and images that purport to be unmediated images of the stable and invariant features of the social topology of capitalism. Harvey regards such signifiers as functioning to translate ideological discourse - with limited effectiveness - into social praxis in an attempt to provide a source of stability and coherence within our everyday life experiences of postmodern capitalism, a stability that is always within the capitalist order and which by necessity precludes any notion of alternatives to capitalism as a socio-economic order. This linking of semiotic and social practices is understood by Harvey as a means by which capitalism tries to reconcile its own inherent contradictions by trying to find an ideological 'mythology' which reconciles its tendencies to promote a fragmented and transient imaginary and experience of life with its need to reproduce itself as a coherent social, cultural, economic and political system. Harvey's reading of this practice is one in which signification is used to mediate an always already existing

world and the always already existing socio-economic praxis of capitalism. It is one in which processes of signification represent or reflect other irreducible forms of reality without being themselves constitutive of those forms of reality. Harvey's theorising of signification in postmodern capitalism is one in which the anterior realities of time and space determine the ultimate contours and features of human existence, and human existence is, in fact, unthinkable outside the ontological and epistemological conditions set by those realities. All imagineries, all semiurgies, all orders of signification, all regimes of economic production, exchange and accumulation, are ultimately ontologically secondary to time and space as those entities which ultimately determine the nature of our *lebenswelt*. Harvey's view of the contemporary media and the imaginary of advertising, is that they are ultimately dependent upon realities that are external to them, and yet they manipulate the foundational realities of space and time to increase capital accumulation through the use of multi-media advertising. It is in this valorisation of a pristine reality that Harvey is at his greatest distance from Baudrillard's thought; his imaginary mediates but does not constitute the real, while Baudrillard's conception of postmodern capitalism rests on an absolute refusal to grant credence to any notion of a pristine physical real or a socio-economic base on which the superstructure of signification and social exchange is then erected. However, it has to be said that Baudrillard's commitment to structures leads to a situation where he seems to take an essential position in which binary structures displace noumenal reality to such an extent that they themselves become essences, a sort of fundamental level of being which informs the phenomenal world of simulacra. This trait is most pronounced in *Simulations* where Baudrillard's anti-realist materialism threatens to collapse into a binary essentialism, a discourse which reads all contemporary social and cultural phenomena as purely surface effects informed by a 'inner' world of structures. In

Baudrillard's defence it has to be said that the real/apparent or base/superstructural conception of the real is powerfully ingrained in theoretical discourse and is it is therefore difficult not to lapse back into using such a conception. However, Baudrillard's anti-realism, while avoiding the confusion of cultural and natural categories that afflicts Harvey's account of contemporary capitalism, is weakened by presenting its conception of objects in such a way that it could all too easily be read as an idealist critique of materialist theory. This leads to a situation in which Baudrillard can all too easily be accused of writing 'metaphysics' in the derogatory sense of erecting abstract theoretical structures that have no actual purchase on the current social and cultural conjunctures of contemporary capitalism.

In contrast, Harvey, as we have seen, regards capitalist development as being led primarily by the imperatives to technological development and their effects on specific, concrete social relations of production. His view of signification is therefore that it comprises a representative rather than a constitutive process, one in which the **“emphasis upon ephemerality, collage, fragmentation and dispersal in philosophical and social thought mimics the conditions of flexible accumulation” [Harvey 1989, pg 302]** . This view is diametrically opposed to Baudrillard's account of the relation between signification and political economy in contemporary capitalist society, which presents the development of capitalism as a genealogy of simulacra - a process in which it is signification, the regime of sign production, reproduction and exchange, that characterises the different social formations of capitalism. For Baudrillard, signification is the privileged social practice. He does not seek to base signification on an ontologically prior order of reality, but regards signification as that which produces, and reproduces, different notions of a ontological order that determines the object of signification. It is

important to stress that for Baudrillard, unlike Harvey, there is no meaning inherent in the properties of the 'real' world or in anything but the structural formations that constitute a given social order. Nor, for Baudrillard, are there any irreducible, anterior ontological properties that are constitutive of the world in which structural formations exist. Baudrillard's conception of signification privileges it as the only source of social and cultural meanings, meanings that believes can and should be reduced to the play of structures that constitute signification.

In *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard introduces the notion of 'simulation' as the ideological effects of the discourse of political economy, a discourse which imposes its own system of categories, its own conception of the 'order of things' in defining its object:

**“Objectivity and truth are only the *effect* of the parcellization of a field of knowledge, of its autonomization under certain rules. Being closed off from everything else by a perfect and fragmented knowledge, that is the imaginary of the exact sciences, and the desire of science is nothing but the fascination with miscomprehension. Political economy as a science of the detached is thus properly ideological and the [Marxist] critique of political economy, when it wishes itself to be “scientific” (materialist), only serves to reinforce its object as a detached abstraction. There are no economic truths, or better, we have fashioned the truth of the economic as an arbitrary instance.”**

**[Baudrillard 1975, pg 149 - all italics the author's]**

The notion that the discourse of political economy and the discourse of Marxist critical theory have systematically formed the object of which they speak, rather than being a representation of an anterior reality, is obviously based on the discourse theory elaborated by Michel Foucault in his books *The Order of Things*

and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Throughout his career, Foucault advocated a position that refused to treat things as the source of discourse, he refused the common sense notion that meaning results from achieving a proper relation between words (or any other type of sign) and things. The discourses of political economy and Marxism, in Baudrillard's view, are constitutive of the realities that they would have us believe are both logically and chronologically prior to them. The discourse of political economy is therefore ideological in appearing to represent an object, when it is in fact constitutive of that object. It is also ideological in that, according to Baudrillard, it presents political economy and Marxism as pre-given totalities, despite the fact that these totalities result from a purely discursive 'closure' in which some privileged chains of signifiers are distinguished as constituting 'political economy' or 'Marxism' in contradistinction to other chains of signifiers that constitute other 'disciplines' or 'sciences'. It will be seen that in taking this position, Baudrillard's adopted an ontological and epistemological stance which is diametrically opposed to that of the Marxist tradition, and that his critical approach is characterised by a thoroughgoing ontological anti-essentialism and anti-realism. This is not to say that Baudrillard is in any way an idealist, taking the position that there is nothing beyond discourse. Baudrillard, it must be stressed, insists on the materiality of signification, on the materiality of the process of simulation and its effects on the production and reproduction of the social, the economic and the cultural. However, it is also the case that this position is extremely vulnerable to being recuperated as a form of idealism, and as a form of discursive essentialism, which privileges discourse in the same reductionist way as Stalinist interpretations of Marxism privilege economic determinism as the ultimate source of our conditions of existence. This problem with Baudrillard's work will be discussed later in this chapter, although. It will be argued here that Baudrillard's

approach to theorising signification as simulation is in fact materialist.

We have seen Foucault's basic premise that **“meaning is a product of differences between signs”** [Lacan 1994, pg xxiii], as David Macey puts it in his introduction to Jacques Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, is the point of departure for Baudrillard's radical critique of the contemporary capitalism and its semiurgy. In her *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault*, Michele Barrett offers a lucid description of Foucault's approach to understanding discourse, which is also highly applicable to Baudrillard's early attempts to elucidate his own radical position, despite Baudrillard's subsequent distancing of himself from Foucault in his polemic *Forget Foucault*:

**“Discourses are composed of signs, but they do more than designate things, for they are ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’. In a neat reversal of the classical materialist hierarchy Foucault says that the rules of discursive practice ‘define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of vocabulary, but the ordering of objects.’”**

**[Barrett 1991, pg 130]**

It will be seen that Baudrillard's conception of both political economy and Marxism rests on the assumption that they are discursive practices that produce and reproduce their discursive objects according to the logic of their own codes. The world of an orthodox Marxist and the world of a classical political economist are both simulations governed by the discourses that form their models. These discourses, these simulations, do not translate the terms of reality into the forms and processes of signification, they instead substitute their codes, their closed structural logics, for the object they purport to represent. The economic simulation is a instance of what Baudrillard's dubs a “third order” simulacra, a form of

simulation which is not based on the relation of a copy (simulation) to a real original, nor based on abstract forces of production as in the second or industrial schema of simulation. Third order simulacra are the latest, and in Baudrillard's view the most oppressive, of the three orders of simulation that define the production, reproduction and exchange of meaning in Western Europe and North America.

Because of its importance to understanding Baudrillard's work, his genealogy of simulacra deserves careful consideration. Baudrillard's genealogy of the forms of simulacra that open the second essay in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, an essay which is better known, at least for anglophone readers, as the second chapter of Baudrillard's most famous (or infamous) work *Simulations*. Baudrillard's genealogy owes much to the methodology of the later Foucault. It is an approach in which the emergence of new orders of simulacra are delineated in order to understand fully the radical discontinuity between given regimes of signification in a way that rejects teleological schemas in favour **"of critique through the presentation of difference"** [Sarup 1988, pg 63]:

**"There are three orders of simulacra, running parallel to the successive mutations of the law of value since the Renaissance:**

- The counterfeit is the dominant schema in the 'classical' period from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution.**
- Production is the dominant schema in the industrial era.**
- Simulation is the dominant schema in the current code-governed phase.**

**The first-order simulacrum operates on the natural law of value, the second-order on the market law of value, and the third order on the structural law of value."** [Baudrillard 1993, pg 50]

Simulacra can be defined as regimes of signification, the historical emergence of

significatory orders and their relation to their referents, or, in other words, the relationship of signs to 'reality' and the effect of the social circulation of those signs. It will be seen that Baudrillard maintains the fundamental dualism between the structural production and reproduction of meaning in the form of signs and the 'referent' or 'reality' to which those signs refer that was first elucidated by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. In this course of lectures, Saussure broke the link between object and representation, referent and sign, which, in various forms, had been regarded as the locus of meaning in discourse and significatory practices. The dynamics of meaning, for Saussure and Baudrillard, are produced by the constellation of structural relationships that constitute a sign. In this account of signification, signs gain their meaning by the relationships between their constituent elements (a sign = a signifier, the concrete material form of a sign, and a signified, the image or concept conveyed by the signified) rather than a unmediated or natural relationship with their referents. A sign is replacement for another entity, something that stands in something else's place. It is always already a substitution, an entity that puts itself in the place of the thing, event or person that it signifies; the sign is always already a usurper from the inception of the modern order of signification, in Baudrillard's genealogy of simulacra, by the virtue of the fact it does not translate the inherent meanings of the world into significatory media, but stands in the place of its referent.

Prior to the early modern period, Baudrillard argues in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* and *Simulations* that there was no distinction between signs and the real. The order of signs was the order of nature. The pre-Renaissance order of signification was one in which there was no circulation of signs and meanings, signs were direct emanations of the given, and the social order was also an emanation of

this 'natural' given. Prior to the Renaissance and the emergence of a mercantile capitalist economy, Baudrillard argues that signs were restricted, they designated positions in an immutable, God-given social hierarchy, a hierarchy in which to appropriate the wrong sign would be severely punished. Baudrillard describes this regime of signification as that which constitutes a cruel and innately oppressive social order, and warns against the 'dream' of returning to such an unequivocal, closed order of signification:

**“If we are starting to dream again, today especially, of a world of sure signs, of a strong “symbolic order”, make no mistake about it: this order has existed and it was that of a ferocious hierarchy, since transparency and cruelty for signs go together. In caste societies, feudal or archaic, cruel societies, the signs are limited in number, and are not widely diffused, each one functions with its full value as interdiction, each is a reciprocal obligation between caste, clans or persons.” [Baudrillard 1983, pg 84]**

Modern totalitarian societies, particularly those controlled by Fascist or Nazi regimes, have displayed exactly this nostalgia for re-inventing the strong sign, the sign that acts as a social and cultural determinant, as a socio-culturally constitutive power. The order of the strong sign is, as Baudrillard points out, an order in which the number, type and functions of signs are restricted, and that these restrictions which govern networks of social power relations and unequal social obligations are carefully policed. The pre-Renaissance social order was truly, for Baudrillard, an order of signification: it was a social order in which social position, power and prestige were defined by the signs that different individuals were allowed to appropriate. The social was a hierarchical order of signs, a fixed order of meaning in which signification was integral to social relationships, a manifestation of people's social condition, which was part and parcel of a wider, God-given reality. In the

pre-Renaissance order of signification, signs did merely 'refer' to reality, they were integral to reality, and it was only with the emergence of the first order of simulacra, the first order of meaning based on a distinction between sign and reality, that the notion of signs as being in some way a substitute, a replacement for a given external referent, became dominant.

The first order of simulacra is one which Baudrillard describes as being based on the differential relationship between the real and signs of that reality. The discourses and imaginary of first order simulation was characterised by a distinction that was maintained between the real and signs which copied or, rather, were counterfeits of the real. This order of simulation depended on there being a clear point of demarcation between the sign, the copy, and its referent in the order of reality. The real was the point of departure for signification which was a form of superstructure, an artificial order erected on the base of the natural. In this schema of signification, meaning arises from the radical distinction between the terms of the simulated or counterfeited and pristine, given reality. Signs have meaning precisely because they are not originals, but belong to a secondary order, an order of copies, forgeries, fakes of the real. These counterfeits always aim at the most faithful reproduction of its referent, but they are always debarred from the pristine order of the real that they seek to copy in such detail. The first order of simulacra, the order of the real and counterfeit, is one in which restriction is no longer applied to the circulation of signs in society, but is applied to the ontological hierarchy of natural, 'real' being and artificial copies of that being.

This order of simulation is predicated upon a bar between sign and referent, copy and reality. As Baudrillard writes in *Simulations*, the sign of the classical or

early modern period is characterised by, on the one hand, the immense proliferation of sign-forms relative to the restricted order of signification, and, on the other, the fixed boundary between two ontological orders, the pristine real and the counterfeit:

**“For we have passed from a limited order of signs, which prohibits “free production”, to a proliferation of signs according to demand. But the sign multiplied no longer resembles in the slightest the obliged sign of limited diffusion: it is its counterfeit, not by corruption of an “original”, but by extension of a material whose very clarity depended on the restriction by which it was bound. No longer discriminating (it is no more than competitive), unburdened of all restraint, universally available, the modern sign still simulates necessity in taking itself as tied somehow to the world.”**

**[Baudrillard 1983, pg 85]**

It will be seen that this free circulation of signs, signs which are not in themselves a part of the natural order, but fabricated substitutes for their referents, occurs at the historical moment in which mercantile capitalism is emerging. As we have seen, Baudrillard believes that the logic of meaning under capitalism is analogous to the logic of capitalist exchange, meanings are produced by the circulation of signs as exchange values (signifiers) which refer to their use value (signifieds/referents), as though they were the ontological finality of the sign, as though they were that which justified the exchange of a proliferating number of signifiers despite the fact that they were no longer umbilically bound to their signifieds and referents. At this point, signs become exchangeable, the circulation and exchange of signs against referents is the essential characteristic the modern form of the sign. Signs are now free to proliferate and be exchanged both against other signs and referents, but this freedom occurs because signs are no longer irrevocably moored to referents. At

the very start of the capitalist project of exchange and accumulation, the system of sign exchange is haunted by the possibility that signs can, and will, lie, that they are not just clear natural indices, but that they can manipulate, subvert and displace given reality.

Baudrillard describes this Janus-faced event as being at once the liberation of meaning from its hitherto fixed constraints, and a powerful sense of how signs have become a fabrication, a form of production which moves the natural referent into the position of being that which is always already hidden behind the sign. The cost of escaping a fixed order of signification is the fact that 'truth' is no longer immanent, but is, as we have seen, generated from a discourse and imaginary which bifurcate the world into overt appearances and hidden substance, a discourse that is now wedded to the notion of production as its condition of possibility. Baudrillard describes this semiology as the first emergence of the couplet of signification and political economy:

**“It is with the Renaissance, then, that the forgery is born along with the natural, ranging from the deceptive finery on people’s backs to the prosthetic fork, from the stucco interiors to Baroque theatrical scenery. The entire classical era was the age of the theatre par excellence. The theatre is a form that gripped social life in its entirety as well as all architecture from the Renaissance on. From these incredible achievements with stucco and Baroque art we can unravel the metaphysics of the counterfeit, as well as the new ambitions of Renaissance man [sic]. These latter consist in an earthly demiurgy, the transubstantiation of all nature into a single substance, a theatrical sociality unified under the sign of the bourgeoisie values, beyond differences of blood, rank or caste. Stucco is the triumphant democracy of**

**all artificial signs, the apotheosis of the theatre and fashion, revealing the unlimited potential of the new class, as soon as it was able to end the sign's exclusivity." [Baudrillard 1993, pg 51]**

The ability to use a single medium (stucco) to fashion a perfect copy of the disparate objects of the world, dramatises, for Baudrillard, the power of the new class to tear apart the fixities of the feudal order and to remake the world as a simulacrum. A simulacrum that celebrates the 'universality' of bourgeoisie values in its displacement of the immanent real with counterfeits of that reality. However, the world that is posited in the discourse of signification as the dialectic of appearance and substance is still a fleshed-out, nuanced reality. The real is an intricate interlocking of different objects in different orders, it is the ultimate source of meaning, and the sign always pays homage to the primacy of the world in its attempts to mimic the cornucopia of being. However, the industrial revolution's introduction of mass production results in a sea-change in the order of simulation. The world as a unique reality counterfeited by a simulacrum of unique signs is displaced, with the emergence of mass production, in favour of a regime of signification based on the radical equivalence and exchangeability of signs. Baudrillard's second order simulacra is comprised of a play of signification in which signs are not exchanged for the real, but are exchanged for each other as they proliferate to the point that any trace of their origins is lost. Second order simulacra do not have 'real' objects as their referent, their condition of emergence is the regime of technics that have allowed the serial production of an indefinite number of identical signs. The second order of simulacra, which is treated by Baudrillard in a somewhat cursory fashion in *Simulations* and *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, is very much the moment of political economy, that point at which a theoretical framework and actual economic practices fused together in a new order of

production and signification. The second order of simulacra is the highpoint of political economy and Baudrillard would that the works of political economists such as Ricardo, and the critique instigated by Marx and Engels, are in fact exemplars of second order simulacra, mirroring its conversion of a reality composed of abstract forces into a social world of consumption and exchange. The categories of political economy are displaced by the processes of signification (simulation) as the second order of simulacra gives way to the third order. In this order of simulacra, political economy no longer has an object as the technics of the electronic age inform a praxis of signification which has now displaced production as the basis in what Baudrillard depicts as the capitalist mode of reproduction

In view of this, it is not surprising that Baudrillard takes issue with the Marxist notion that industrialisation is a liberation of productive forces that have at least potentially the prospect of satisfying all human needs if the means of production, distribution and exchange are no longer organised to ensure the continuing accumulation of capital by a minority of the world's population. For Baudrillard, technics, the physical machinery of production, is a medium disseminates a new form of sign, and as such technics are not neutral, they are that which produces and reproduces the semiurgy of industrial capitalism:

**"The entire analysis of production will be swept aside if we stop regarding it as an original process, as *the* process at the origin of all others, but conversely as a process which reabsorbs every original being and introduces a series of identical beings. Up to this point, we have considered labour as potential, as force and myth, as a generic activity: an energetic-economic myth proper to modernity. We must ask ourselves whether production is not rather an intervention, a *particular* phase, *in the order of signs* - whether it is**

**basically only one episode in the line of simulacra, that episode of producing an infinite series of potentially identical beings (object-signs) by means of technics." [Baudrillard 1993, pg 55 - all italics the author's]**

If for Marxism, production is ultimately production ex-nihilo in that it is the foundational activity, the activity that creates, that fashions the life-world out of quotidian, material reality. The introduction of mass production simply magnified the powers and capabilities of production, the industrial revolution vastly augmented human beings' capacity to fashion the conditions within which they live. However, Baudrillard regards the industrial revolution as a degradation of the sign, an event in which signs lost their referents in the real, and became indices of abstract powers, the forces and dynamics of industrialised mass production. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard adds to his critique of Marxist conceptions of capitalism when he challenges Marx's belief in the liberatory capacity of technics:

**"Marx's greatest error was to have retained a belief in the innocence of machines, the technical process and science - all of which were supposedly capable of becoming living social labour once the system of capital was liquidated, despite the fact that this is precisely what the system is based on." [Baudrillard 1993, pg 15]**

Rather than offer the possibility of a liberation that may be realised by dialectical means, Baudrillard's concept of industrialised mass production is one in which signs are delineated by the simple difference between them, by the fact that one item in the sequence of production is not any other item in that sequence, rather than by their position in relation to a given referent in the real. Second order simulacra are characterised by the effects of mass production on the circulation of commodities/signs that determines the character of an industrialised society ultimately determined by the mass reproduction and exchange of signifiers in a

simulacrum that might be dubbed a 'semio-economic' social order.

Because of the highly abstract and schematic nature of Baudrillard's account of the successive orders of simulacra<sup>3</sup>, it may be useful to consider these conceptions in the light of a short case study which shows the differences between signification and production in the second and third orders of simulation. Gawthorpe Street in the conservation area of the township of Padiham in East Lancashire has recently had its tarmac road surface removed, and its 'original' cobbled surface restored. Gawthorpe Street is a short street of stone built terrace houses on the edge of an important conservation area which contains a large number of mid-Victorian residences, shops, and an early police station. The restoration of its cobbled surface is a part of the ongoing restoration work within the conservation area. However, this fairly trivial event is a striking example of the difference between the second and third orders of simulation; it is an event in which Gawthorpe Street has not been so much restored to its 'original' condition, but has in fact become a third order simulation of its earlier appearance. Gawthorpe Street is not a counterfeit of an original, nor would it be true to describe it as a second order simulation generated by serial production. In its current 'restored' condition, the street is a simulation informed by and generated from a model. The model is in this case a model based on historical knowledge about the original features of a mid-Victorian street, and by restoring the cobbles - much to the detriment of pedestrians crossing the street - Gawthorpe Street has now found itself a simulation, a signifier of a referent which is its model and point of origin. It is worth stressing that there is no economic advantage to be secured by making Gawthorpe Street into a cobbled street again, nor is there is very much use value to be realised

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<sup>3</sup> For convenience, a chart detailing the different orders of simulacra is appended at the end of this chapter.

in converting a street with a safe tarmacdam surface into a version of its former self complete with cobbles that are dangerous to any of the elderly people who live in the neighbourhood. Gawthorpe Street's identity is now that of a sign, a sign whose referent is the conceptual model that is based on a logic by which streets within the conservation area of Padiham are to be distinct from streets in the rest of the township.

Although Gawthorpe Street is a small incidence of simulation, the former textile areas of East Lancashire clearly exhibit the difference between second order and third order simulation on a much larger scale. The Lancashire of the mid-nineteenth century was one in which capital as the technics and social relations of production were exploited as the basis for a dynamics of production on a hitherto unheard of scale. By the 1860s, the Burnley area of Lancashire alone was capable of producing more cotton goods than the entire Belgian textile industry. In the towns and villages of South and East Lancashire, a new order of production informed what Baudrillard, as we have seen, dubbed the second order of simulation. In this order, the only referents are the abstract forces, the physics, of production. The production process was one in which abstract forces were harnessed to produce an uncountable number of identical items. Thousands of yards of woven cotton became thousands of mass produced items, each of which was a sign of its origin in the physics of production, a sign of its aetiology in the transcendent abstract forces of labour. In second order simulation, the substantial original, the ontologically profound referent, becomes abstracted, becomes part of the forces which are the precondition of all production. Accrington, Bolton, Burnley, Blackburn, Helmshore all still contain the relics of this order of simulation, one based on serial production of items which signify only their origins in the forces

harnessed for social production and exchange. However, these relics are increasingly pressed into service as simulations of their earlier selves. In 'working museums' across Lancashire, power looms and spinning machines still work, not as part of a machinery of production but as part of a massive exercise in the simulated reproduction of an earlier phase of Lancashire's economic and social history.

Museums, like the Helmshore Textile Museum and Elizabeth Street Mill, Burnley, are third order simulacra, they are copies without an original in so far as they do not mimic the actual (and terrible) conditions of nineteenth century cotton mills but a model of a working museum. They are not faithful to the actual history of the mills and the people who worked in them, but to a conceptual logic or model of how the past should be experienced as a sign-form or simulation in the last years of the twentieth century. They are places in which the dynamics of production and the second order of simulation have been annexed to the reproduction of third order simulacra, copies which refer only to their models. This process illustrates Baudrillard's argument that the establishment of second order simulation based on mass production is the precondition for the emergence of third order simulation. Baudrillard describes the entry into a semiurgy dominated by third order simulacra in terms of a fundamental change from a mode of (mass) production to an order of reproduction, an order in which all signs are generated from the binary codes of their models:

**"As soon as dead work wins out over living work - that is, as soon as the era of primitive accumulation is over - serial production yields to generation by means of models. And here it is a question of a reversal of origin and finality, for all the forms change once they not so much mechanically reproduced but even conceived from the point-of-view of their very reproducibility, diffracted**

**from a generating nucleus we call the model. Here we are in the third-order simulacra; no longer that of the counterfeit of an original as in the first order, nor that of the pure series as in the second. Here are the models from which proceed all forms according to the modulation of their differences. Only affiliation to the model makes sense, and nothing flows any longer according to its end, but proceeds from the model, the 'signifier of reference', which is a kind of anterior finality and the only reference there is." [Baudrillard 1983, pgs 100 -101 - all italics the author's]**

The third order simulacrum is one in which commodity-signs exist only as a simulation of, or a "diffraction from", the models that preceded them. Third order simulacra are reproductions, signs that are the immanent form of the model from which they are generated. Instead of their meaning being governed by a structural distinction between themselves and reality as referent, their structural principle is that of the binary opposition, the simple difference between terms, the difference between the coded, and coding, model and its manifestation as the ceaseless circulation of reproduced signs. The only 'meaning' of signs is now their relation to the code that governs their reproduction and their exchange in a late capitalism semiurgy or, rather, semio-economy that is, for Baudrillard, no longer based on **"the law of capital, but on the structural law of value"** [Baudrillard 1983, pg 101]. Signs now circulate without any reference to the real, they proliferate to form a 'hyperreality', a reality that is generated from the play of ungrounded model-generated signs that Baudrillard contends is more real than the real itself. The textile museums of East Lancashire are not indices of a lost historical period, but merely simulations governed by generating models. With the advent of third order simulacra, any access to the 'real', the natural, any referent beyond and above the sign is lost. The real becomes increasingly 'hyperreal', a condition which could be

defined as a profusion of semioticised objects which are devoid of referential meaning while being totally immanent and lacking any pristine reality in their own right. Such objects are more real than real, just as the simulated fabric and contents of the Helmshore textile museum is more 'real' than any real cotton mill, and displace rather than signify accurately the reality of sweated work in the weaving and spinning sheds of East Lancashire.

Baudrillard's account of the emergence of third order simulacra is based on a through-going rejection of the notion that meaning is inherent within things. He does not accept, as Harvey does, that there are fundamental ontological categories upon which the structural relations that inform the social, economic and cultural orders are then erected. Baudrillard regards noumenal reality as something which has been lost in the development of capitalism's semio-economy. This economy has reshaped the order of meaning in line with the dynamics of its own structures, the real as a fundamental given has been displaced by the semiotic, by the circulation of signs which are no longer valued in terms of their referents, in terms of their relation to a referential finality that is analogous to the category of use value, but in terms of their 'exchange value' against other signs. The Baudrillardian world is one in which signs are increasingly detached from any final reference and are free to circulate and mutate in capitalist order in which the reproduction of a given code, a given structure of meaning, has displaced a social sphere based on primary production. Capital now exists to reproduce its own forms and media, and in a real sense, Baudrillard's world is one in which reification has reached its apogee in a world in which the distinction between subject and object increasingly undermined as people become reduced to the status of terminals in the vast relay network that is the third order of simulation. According to Baudrillard, the

replacement of the real by simulations that are even more 'realistic', more 'life-like' than the real is an event which stems from mutations in the nature of capitalism; capitalism, for Baudrillard, no longer needs the 'real', the noumenal, as its finality, and it has moved beyond any concept of the real in reproducing itself as the reproduction of simulations. Baudrillard accords no referential value to the real, it is not, for him, the aetiological source of signification, nor an element in a dialectic of historical progress or development. The Baudrillardian universe is one in which signs have been unmoored from the real, and now circulate without impediment in a semio-economy which is antithetical to that of the pre-Renaissance order of restricted signification. In "Simulations", Baudrillard writes that the pre-Renaissance order of signification was one in which fashion was not possible, and that fashion, as a combinatory of different signs, begins only with the emergence of first order simulacra [Baudrillard 1983, pg 83]. The next chapter will therefore examine Baudrillard's approach to analysing fashion an actual cultural phenomena in greater detail, using his analysis of the role of fashion in mature capitalism in order to assess the strengths and weaknesses of his position in relation to the Marxist analysis of fashion put forward by Dick Hebdige and Angela McRobbie's analysis of fashion and its relation to identity.

Figure 1:

Order of Simulacra	Historical Period	Mode of Production	Mode of Signification
1 <sup>st</sup> Order	15 <sup>th</sup> to 17 <sup>th</sup> Century	Pre- mass production No serial production Hand crafting of a limited number of items	Based on original and copy Meaning of signs guaranteed by God-given anterior reality Signs act as a mirror of nature
2 <sup>ND</sup> Order	Late 17 <sup>th</sup> to Later 20 <sup>th</sup> Century	Mass or serial production Conversion of abstract forces into serial production of identical objects	Objects now index their own conditions of production and not a referential reality Objects are now the mirrors of production rather than nature with no referents but abstract forces of production
3 <sup>rd</sup> Order	Late 20 <sup>th</sup> Century	Incessant reproduction of object/signs (simulations) governed by models	Objects now signs without referents displace the real by a circulation of an always already simulated 'hyper-reality'

### Chapter 3: Fashion as Signification

The preceding chapter offered an account of Baudrillard's genealogy of simulacra, his account of the development of modes of production understood as the mechanisms of signification that was contrasted against David Harvey's Marxist account of the development of postmodern capitalism. Baudrillard's genealogy is one in which history is a succession of orders of simulacra in which concepts of representation are changed by the emergence of different technics of production and reproduction. The contours of Baudrillard's theoretical world are in some ways, therefore, similar to those of Marxist conceptions of historical change. Orthodox Marxists would regard historical development as resulting ultimately from changes in the productive forces that inform the nature of a given society. However, Baudrillard's later work is based on the notion that the mode of production is an effect of the signifiatory order. Baudrillard therefore argues that the mode of production is not the ontological ground depicted in both Marxist theory and political economy, but is rather a medium of social exchange, a form of communication in societies which are themselves constituted by signifiatory practices. He also, as we have seen, has come to reject any form of materialism based on the concept of a referential reality that constitutes the ultimate source of social meaning. This, as has been argued in the preceding chapter, does not mean that Baudrillard is an idealist. He should be regarded, rather, as a materialist who views the dynamic interplay of structures as being the origin of signification. Baudrillard's materialism is one that is predicated on structure, on the interplay between the terms of a structural formation. It will be seen therefore that Baudrillard regards structures as being constitutive of any given social order of meaning, and that the genealogy of simulacra discussed in detail in the last chapter is in fact a history of the way in

which social exchange has been structurally determined in Western societies since the middle ages.

Baudrillard's critique of what he regards as orthodox Marxism's inability to transcend the essential categories of political economy and his alternative account of the development of capitalism in his genealogy of simulacra are highly suggestive theoretical constructs which seem to have been elaborated with a view to making their practical application as difficult as possible. This chapter will therefore try to remedy this by looking at how Baudrillard can be used in analysing an example of social function of a sign system. It will concentrate closely on Baudrillard's account of fashion and compare its understanding of fashion as signification with the sophisticated Marxist account of fashion put forward by Dick Hebdige in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Baudrillard's most sustained consideration of fashion appears in the collection of essays entitled *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. This book is the one in which Baudrillard consolidates a radical political position outside the Marxist tradition. However, this is a position which is still informed by Marxist categories and methodology. In breaking with Marxism, Baudrillard still remains to some degree within its orbit, and he certainly remains within the tradition of critical materialist theorising despite his refusal to take a realist position based on any covert or overt form of Kantianism. In Baudrillard's theorising the social does not exist for the benefit of the economic: the social is not the organisation of production and consumption in order to secure economic advantages for (some) members of that society. Therefore, for Baudrillard, the economic is not the basis or hidden referent of society, but another medium of communication and exchange that defines the relations between the people who inhabit our society. The social does not exist for the economic, the

economic is a medium of communication in a societies that are defined by systems of signification. The production and reproduction of signified meaning is the key social activity: communication sutures together objects in the current order of signification, its discourses and images. Despite his infamous rejection of sociology, Baudrillard continues to theorise capitalism as a totality, an ensemble of structural relations, that must be understood as a unity, unlike other radical 'postmodern' or 'post-structuralist' thinkers, such as Foucault and Jean Francois Lyotard, who reject the idea that contemporary society can be theorised as a totality of relations and effects. In so far as he recognises sign circulation and exchange as a universal system, a structural totality, Baudrillard remains far closer to the Marxist tradition than the majority of other 'postmodern' writers for whom totalisation is simply an attempt to ignore and marginalise social and semiotic 'difference'. In Baudrillard's work the signifiatory is privileged above and beyond the economic, indeed, Baudrillard's concept of the postmodern 'social' order can be approached as being that of a superstructure without a base, a play of systematically related structures that are not grounded on any noumenal real. Baudrillard's approach to society is one of reducing society to signification and communications, his is a 'semio-society', a society in which power and politics consist in the circulation of signs and images rather than the control of the means of economic production and exchange.

The role of fashion as a form of signification in contemporary society is a recurring theme in Baudrillard's work. He has used fashion to illustrate his arguments from his earliest writings onwards, and he has consistently regarded fashion as a combinatory of signs, a bricolage of elements, in which meaning is an effect of structure. This is mirrored in his methodology which has become increasingly based on speculation which is not related to any form or concrete

empirical or historical analysis. Baudrillard's extended theorising about the signifiatory role of fashion in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* is very abstract and it does not include any case studies or specific examples of how fashion functions as a form of signification. This methodological approach is one which is consistent with Baudrillard's refusal to endorse the notion that any system of signification has its source in the extra-discursive, in the mute world of 'real' things. Signs, for Baudrillard, are structures that no longer related to, or exchanged against, their referents because their mode of production, or rather their mode of reproduction, is one in which signs are no longer ontologically dependent on an anterior reality. Baudrillard's signs are autonomous, and more than ever, sign exchange governs and dominates the social topology of late capitalism. Baudrillard's ontology of the sign is therefore one of a structured surface that does not rest on any form of referential or noumenal foundation. Signs have become unmoored from the real, and Baudrillard's account of the socius of late twentieth century capitalism is one in which signs interact with each other in a simulation of communication, a simulation in which the human subject has been displaced by, and perhaps dispersed into, signs and their unlimited circulation in the postmodern semiurgy.

In Baudrillard's earliest writings, this form of circulation is one in which semiotics are subordinated to achieving the ever accelerating consumption of commodities that characterises postmodern capitalism. It results in social exchange being reduced to consumption, which Baudrillard argues should be regarded now as a more important underlying social dynamic than production. Even as a neo-Marxist, Baudrillard is adamant that postmodern capitalism is based on a new form of social praxis, a praxis in which production is relegated to the status of the 'alibi', the *raison d'être*, of consumption. In contrast to the world of fashion and

its ceaseless circulation of ephemeral objects, Baudrillard expresses a nostalgia for objects that were exchanged through generations, objects that gave a stability to the immediate, everyday social world. In *The System of Objects*, he writes of the socially constructed and maintained differences between objects, differences which once gave a profound social meaning to objects and which have been annulled by fashion:

**“Today a farmhouse table has cultural value, but just thirty years ago its sole value arose from the purpose it served. In the eighteenth century there was simply no relationship between a ‘Louis XV’ table and a peasant’s table: there was an unbridgeable gulf between the two types of object, just as there was between the two corresponding social classes. No single cultural system embraced them both.” [Baudrillard 1996, pgs 137 -138]**

At this point in his career, Baudrillard regards fashion as an adjunct of the market, a carnival of ephemeral commodities. Fashion is that which governs the structural relations that give meaning to objects, it is a principle of control, a code, a matrix which determines the meaning of things. Fashion has become an admixture, the bringing together of objects in a single system, a system governed by a single - albeit complex - code, that were once radically separated by their use and cultural value. Any thing, any commodity can be included in the combinatorial of fashion, and therefore there are no ‘unbridgeable gulfs’ between objects and their social consumption. The admixture of fashion is one that is no longer structured in terms of a distinction between discrete social classes and their cultural requirements, but is structured as a distinction between the old and the new, with the new being the privileged term in the couplet. The implicit logic of fashion in *The System of Objects* is that of continual addition and replacement, new objects - which are marginally different to existing objects - are introduced as replacements for existing objects.

New styles of clothing replace 'earlier' styles, rendering them 'unfashionable' or obsolescent, just as the latest style of a particular make and model of car renders the earlier version of the 'same' car unfashionable and discounts its value as a sign-form. Fashion, for the Baudrillard of *The System of Objects*, is a manifestation of the way in which capitalism seeks to constantly cancel existing things and situations in favour of the new, the more 'up to date', the more 'advanced'. This is a order of distinction - the distinction between the privileged category of the 'new' and a category of the 'old', the obsolescent, that which is simply a residue of earlier instances of production. In this period of his career, Baudrillard is almost a precursor of Harvey's concern with late capitalism as a 'throw away' society, a dynamic process of renewal in which that which exists is always being supplanted by the new in a society that privileges exchange value over and above use value. Fashion is about circulation and exchange in the early Baudrillard: it is the meeting place of political economy and signification. It is the locus of an exchange system that no longer privileges use value, but instead valorises sign exchange value, and which has spread its influence over all the objects that support and inform our social and cultural lives.

In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard characterises fashion as a dynamic of obsolescence, a process in which changes in the style of objects lead to a situation in which objects are no longer produced for use, but as a elements in a system predicated on the certain obsolescence of all the objects related within the system. From the outset, for Baudrillard, fashion is a structure which is dedicated to annulling use value by translating objects into sign-forms. While Baudrillard cites French automobile design in the 1960s in *The System of Objects*, a clearer example of the development of the commodity semiotics of the car is provided by

the American car industry from the late 1940s to the mid 1970s. American cars were massively constructed with a simple mechanical lay out, and as functional objects they had a much longer life span than the profit motive dictated. In order to boost demand, the American car industry embarked on the radical redesign of cars on a regular (often annual) basis, and ensured that individual models were updated on a regular basis from the late 1940s onwards. The addition of huge tail fins, fenders and an abundance of garish chrome decorations allied to a plethora of colour schemes effectively turned the car into a sign-form. The fins, grilles and fenders of various models became elements or paradigms which were periodically redesigned to radically alter the overall appearance, or 'syntagm', of individual models. This process began to change the status of the automobile in American from being a use object to becoming a sign-form, something that was nearer a sign of fashion and a testament to its consumers' status and the affluence of mid-century American society than a functional object. This process can be seen clearly when the marketing strategies of the Ford Motor Company in the 1950s is compared with its marketing strategy in the 1920s. In the 1920s, Ford was a one model company, it produced the Model T in a number of different guises, and sold the one model on the basis of its simplicity and durability. The Model T was famously only ever available in black, a colour which became the signifier of its functionality. The Model T Ford was its use value: it was designed to be used over a long period of time in often harsh conditions. By contrast, American Fords of the 1950s were signs of their own fashionability, their position as the model of the moment, the perfect embodiment of the use value of the automobile.

Baudrillard argues that the use of tail fins in American car design, introduced in the 1948 model year by Cadillac, is a semioticisation of the car's use value: an

instance of function becoming an aestheticised sign-form:

**"There was a long period during which American cars were adorned by immense tail fins. For Vance Packard these perfectly symbolized the American obsession with consumer goods. They have other meanings, too: scarcely had it emancipated itself from the forms of earlier kinds of vehicles than the automobile-object began connoting nothing more than the result so achieved - that is to say, nothing more than itself as a victorious function. We thus witnessed a veritable triumphalism on the part of the object: the car's fins became the victory over space - and they were purely a sign, because they bore no direct relationship to that victory (indeed, if anything they ran counter to it, tending as they did to make vehicles heavier and more cumbersome)." [Baudrillard 1996, pg 59]**

Baudrillard is correct to point out that the semioticisation of the car impaired its functionality. In fact, through out the 1950s the use value of cars suffered as they became harder to maintain and repair, more vulnerable to rust and damage by other cars' tail fins and fenders, while additionally becoming increasingly restricted to use on specially designed highways rather than a variety of roads and terrains. We have seen that re-styling and the constant addition of new marginal features, such as new grilles, body-work or interior designs, made cars into objects whose value was as much their sign exchange value, their value as a sign of affluence and modishness, as their use value. In addition to this, once the car was included in the semiosis of fashion, it became an increasingly ephemeral object. Fashion becomes a means of radically shortening the life span of objects: fashion introduced, for the early Baudrillard, the notion of objects that are always already obsolete at the point of purchase, objects that are produced as a part of a series which is already being replaced by the designers and engineers who work on developing the next set of

marginal differences for the Ford Motor Company and its competitors.

This process is still the dominant process through which the motor industry stimulates new demand. In the late 1980s and early 1990s FIAT declined as a company and lost its leading position in the small and medium car markets mainly due to offering what was perceived as an elderly range of models. FIAT at that time pursued a policy of keeping the same model, with one major re-styling approximately half way through its production run, for eight years. As a result, FIAT cars were widely perceived to be slightly out of date as they were challenged by newer models from other manufacturers. This judgement did not rest on the technological capabilities of FIAT cars, but on their fashion or sign value. Although many FIAT models such as the Panda and the Uno were important new designs when they were introduced, they were quickly overtaken by more 'modern' designs in their later years of production and were regarded as unfashionable by the motoring press and consumers alike. As a result of this, FIAT has changed its approach and has shortened the production life of its models to around five years, which currently seems to be an industry norm. FIAT has therefore adopted the classic strategy of ensuring that its products are perceived to have a short production span to ensure that they remain fashionable, that they are part of the new as opposed to the accumulation of the old.

In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard cites the strategies listed by Vance Packard for ensuring the obsolescence of mass produced objects in late capitalist societies. These strategies may relate to the technical qualities of an object - a word processor, for instance, is a technological advance that has rendered conventional typewriters obsolescent if not obsolete - or to the build quality and

therefore the durability of products or even to a deliberate truncation of the period of time in which an object is desirable because it is perceived to be new and fashionable:

***“Obsolescence of function.* In this situation an existing product becomes outmoded when a product is introduced that performs the function better.**

***Obsolescence of quality.* Here, when it is planned, a product breaks down or wears out at a given time, usually not too distant.**

***Obsolescence of desirability.* In this situation a product that is still sound in terms of quality or performance becomes ‘worn out’ in our minds because a styling or other change makes it seem less desirable.” [Baudrillard 1996, pg 145 - all italics the author’s]**

FIAT’s production strategies are now geared to producing “obsolescence of desirability” by reducing the length of time models remain in production, thereby making their models more ephemeral and therefore more fashionable as being in line with the latest design trends. FIAT have chosen to ensure that models are discontinued and replaced before their desirability is eroded by too long a production run. Baudrillard notes that obsolescence of desirability and obsolescence of quality work together: accelerating the replacement of objects by new version of the same object tends to lead to a lessening of their quality. Mass production equates to shoddiness for Baudrillard, who regards the mass produced artefacts of the 1960s as being essentially substandard:

**“Thus certain American car parts are designed not to survive more than sixty thousand kilometres of driving. As manufactures themselves will discretely admit, the quality of most serial objects could be substantially improved with**

**no significant increase in production costs. Deliberately debased parts are just as expensive to manufacture as normal ones... BUT THE OBJECT CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO ESCAPE FROM EPHEMERALITY OR FROM FASHION. This is the fundamental characteristic of the series: the objects that compose it are weakened on a systematic basis.” [Baudrillard 1996, pg 146]**

This passage dates Baudrillard’s text. The strategy for ensuring obsolescence in the motor industry has moved on from the 1960s - when the British Motor Corporation (BMC) included sheets of brown paper in car doors to ensure that they would rust - to one in which the actual quality of most cars has improved vastly over earlier models. Contemporary design and engineering standards have ensured that cars are better made, safer and less prone to corrosion than ever before. The car manufacturers have moved away from obsolescence of quality, which is a flaw in the fundamental use value of an object, to ensuring obsolescence of desirability. Cars are now fashion items, they are marketed and advertised as such; cars are no longer consumed as machines for transportation but as signs circulating through the medium of fashion. This is attested to by motoring magazines and television programmes which fetishize the appearance of cars, that frame them as signs in a general economy of sign exchange as opposed to prosaic functional objects.

Cars have become sign-forms, signs of their own newness, their own short-lived status as objects of desire. The car is increasingly not a machine but a sign, a sign in which its functionality has been reduced to a signifier in the manner that Baudrillard describes in *The System of Objects*. Mark Gottdiener’s essay *The System of Objects and the Commodification of Everyday Life* [Ed. Kellner, 1994] concerns Baudrillard’s critique of the way in which commodified objects are reduced

to a sign of their functionality is worth recalling in this context. The car is perhaps the best example of the object as a commodified sign-form. Car design is increasing an activity in which function is transposed into the register of the semiotic, the body and engine of the car are increasingly becoming a sign of functionality, a sign which functions in a way which is exactly analogous to how Gottdiener sees the house being transformed **“from the hearth of tradition and historical continuity to a showcase for consumerism and status” [Ed Kellner 1994, pg 31]**. Function is not the referent of the sleek, contoured body of the latest model to be launched, it is a signifier, an alibi for the car as sign-form. This process is exemplified by the way in which ‘concept cars’ from design studios are now far more likely to be put into mass production. Baudrillard regards mass or serial production as being predicated on models, which are transcendent in relation to the series but inform its identity. The model is the ‘idea’ of the series, its idealist essence: it is that which confers an identity and substance on the indeterminate number of objects that comprise a mass produced series. Baudrillard draws a firm distinction between the model and the mass produced series:

**“The model, by contrast, is privileged in that it lasts (though only in a relative sense, for it too is caught in the speeded-up cycle of objects). It is granted solidity, entitled to ‘loyalty’. Paradoxically, it has come to dominate an area traditionally reserved, it would seem, for the series, namely use value. This superiority of the model, reinforced by the influence of fashion - that is, the combination of technical and formal qualities - are what constitutes its superior ‘functionality’.” [Baudrillard 1996, pg 147]**

The concept car is a model, superior in its quality and its status to any and all serially produced cars. It is the embodied idea of a car, and by introducing features from concept cars into serially produced models, the manufactures re-enforce the

dependence of the serially produced on their originating model. The concept car is not 'diluted' in its status a model by being put into mass production, rather the superior status of the concept car model is celebrated by the series which is an embodiment of the model's transcendent essence, its technical and conceptual superiority. The model is the referent for each and every individual serially produced object, each serially produced object is a sign, a simulation, of the model, each one of which attests, by its lack of uniqueness and aura, to the uniqueness and aura of the model. The distinction between the serially produced and the model is the structural dynamic which drives fashion for the early Baudrillard - fashion is the creation of simulations informed by models. Fashion is arena of change, the arena in which the public are to learn new needs and new ways of satisfying those needs. It is a process which is symptomatic of what Gerald Graff describes as the way in which **“advanced capitalism needs to destroy all vestiges of tradition, all orthodox ideologies, all continuous and stable forms of reality in order to stimulate higher levels of consumption”** [cited in Marcus 1989, pg 128]. The Baudrillard of *The System of Objects* regards fashion as the dynamic heart of consumption, the arena in which the exchange and consumption of sign-forms is continually accelerated. Fashion is a driving force in Western society, in the early Baudrillard's view, because it is ultimately a medium of communication, a medium through which social and cultural meanings are constructed and exchanged.

However, as early as his second book, *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard begins to regard fashion in a different way. In *The Consumer Society*, he regards fashion as not simply being an exemplar of the dynamic of consumption, which he argues has become dominant within West European and American society. Baudrillard

identifies the production of new commodities as a form of reproduction: a dynamic of constant 'renewal' in which the technological dynamism of capitalism is translated into a social dynamism of the continual reproduction of production and consumption. Baudrillard regards fashion as an exemplar of this process. In *The Consumer Society*, he describes the process of constant renewal as a "recycling" which calls to mind "the 'cycle' of fashion" or the late capitalist social imperative that **"everyone must be 'with-it' and must 'recycle themselves' - their clothes, their belongings, their cars - on a yearly, monthly or seasonal basis"** [Baudrillard 1998, pg 100]. He goes on to characterise fashion as a dynamic of constant reinvention, the constant arrival of the new and the reconstitution of the already existing as the new (as in the revivals of out dated fashions) in a process which is a form of coercion, one in which the dynamic of fashion, which functions even at the level of knowledge creation and dissemination, is an imperative to reproduce the socio-economic order of late capitalism:

**"It [fashion] does, however, impose thoroughgoing constraints, and the sanction it wields is that of social success or banishment. We may ask ourselves whether the 'recycling of knowledge', under its scientific cover, does not conceal this same kind of accelerated, obligatory, arbitrary change as fashion, and does not bring into play at the level of knowledge and persons the 'built-in-obsolence' as the cycle of production and fashion foists on material objects."** [Baudrillard 1998, pg 100]

It will be seen at this stage of Baudrillard's career, he conceived of fashion as a sign of another, more fundamental process. At the time of writing The Consumer Society, Baudrillard still employed a depth model in which critical theory could fathom the underlying socio-economic sources of phenomena such as fashion. Fashion, here, is a sign of a social dynamic, it is one part, and one part only, of a

complex capitalist socio-economic order. However, fashion is not conceived of as being the result of a simple linear process of production, a process in which the very latest fashions are produced to displace yesterday's fashions. Baudrillard is already conceiving of fashion as a moment of production and consumption which form elements in a wider schema of reproduction. Production is already subordinated to reproduction, the reproduction of a particular social order.

Whereas production is a privileged term in some reductionist versions of Marxist thought, Baudrillard abandons the idea of the primacy of production. Even writing within the Marxist tradition, Baudrillard did not subscribe to the view that production is a form of historical poesis, the view that production is a dynamic of social and economic creativity. Baudrillard locates production as that which is merely an element within the process of reproducing the current order of simulacra. The era of production, the era of political economy, is regarded by Baudrillard as being a period characterised by primitive accumulation, the accumulation of the technics and media of mass production which inform the second order of simulacra. Even in his account of the second order of simulacra, production is only ever a form of accumulation for Baudrillard: it does not have any pathos of creativity, it is merely the stockpiling of the elements necessary to generate the third order of simulacra. The age of mass production, the age in which political economy reached its apotheosis, is only the forerunner of the postmodern condition in which production is not a genuinely act but a moment in the general economy of reproduction. Production is not a valorised category in Baudrillard's work and in this sense, he worked outside the theoretical assumptions of orthodox Marxism, even during the 'Marxist' phase of his work. Fashion is not something that he theorises in relation to modes of production and the social relations of production. Fashion is not a

symptom of production in Baudrillard's theorising, it is rather a privileged site in a general economy of semiosis. In taking this position, Baudrillard is already beginning to move towards the position he takes in "Symbolic Exchange and Death" in which, citing Walter Benjamin and Marshal McLuhan, he reduces production from the status of source to the status of a medium of communication:

**"Benjamin was also the first (with McLuhan after him) to grasp technology as a medium rather than a 'productive force' (at which point the Marxian analysis retreats), as the form and principle of an entirely new generation of meaning. The mere fact that any given thing can simply be produced, as such, in an exemplary double is already a revolution: one need only think of the stupefaction of the Black boy seeing two identical books for the first time. That these two technical products are *equivalent* under the sign of necessary social labour is less important in the long term than the serial repetition of the same object (which is also the serial repetition of individuals as labour power). [Baudrillard 1993, pg 56 - author's italics]**

Production, for Baudrillard, is a medium, a form of communication in which meaning is governed by the relations between identical products, objects which are not a copies of an original but which are each the other's perfect replica. The serial production of identical objects, whether these are cars, clothes or books, is from the outset a form of reproduction. It is a medium whose formal properties are such that the 'message' of serial production is endlessly reiterated to an audience of consumers. Baudrillard thereby undermines the ontological primacy of production, it is no longer that which confers the meaning of origin, but that medium by which the hyperreal simulacra of postmodern capitalism is reproduced.

If we again turn to Baudrillard's genealogy of simulacra on which Baudrillard

bases his position, it will be seen that the orders of simulacra can be read, as Efrat Tseelon reads them in her essay *Fashion and Signification in Baudrillard* [Ed. Kellner 1994], as orders of fashion emerging from the mediaeval order of signification which, Baudrillard claims, did not know the concept of fashion. The pre-Renaissance world is depicted by Baudrillard as an order of transparent and absolute signs, signs were 'honest' because the right to use and display them was fiercely policed. Death or maiming were not uncommon forms of retribution for those who dared to display signs to which they had no right. Sign acquisition and display was based on a strictly hierarchical ordering of society, and such an order is inimical to the nature of fashion as an unstable combinatory of appearances or an "emporium of styles". Tseelon notes that:

**"Throughout European history, dress has divided people along class lines. From the Greek and Roman periods through Byzantine and mediaeval eras, but particularly since the fourteenth century which marks the beginning of fashion, the costliness of materials or workmanship involved in the production of garments distinguished courtly from common. Throughout the history of dress it was the principle of scarcity of resources which symbolised rank in dress. Natural scarcity provided "guarantee of exclusivity". Scarcity took either the form of rarity in nature (as in the case of the furs of certain mammals, or of gold and precious stones), or in the man-made resources (as the case of silk which, up to the fifteenth century, was imported from the East)." [Ed Kellner 1994, pgs 120 - 121]**

In this reading, clothes were designed not to protect bodies but to be a sign-form, a display of wealth and/or social status. Rare materials and costly workmanship connoted status and social power, to counterfeit these signs was unacceptable behaviour, behaviour that troubled the essential clarity of the mediaeval regime of

signification. Tseelon's account of what might be called "pre-fashion" emphasises the economic basis of dress as a form of signification, while Baudrillard progressively abandons the idea of an economic substrata acting as the foundations of all social and cultural orders, and his work on fashion reflects his privileging of the signification as the social and cultural dominant.

However, despite the usefulness of the historical perspective in his work, particularly as applied by Tseelon to fashion theory, Baudrillard does exhibit a tendency to be far too schematic in the construction of his genealogy. This is particularly noticeable in Baudrillard's analysis of the pre-Renaissance period in which a complex semiotic and social order is reduced to a sort of signifiatory pre-history, a pre-history in which signs were radically restricted in their circulation by social reciprocity and obligation:

**"In feudal or archaic caste societies, in cruel societies, signs are limited in number and their circulation is restricted. Each retains its full value as a prohibition, and each carries with it a reciprocal obligation between castes, clans or persons, so signs are not arbitrary. The arbitrariness of the sign begins when instead of bonding two persons in an inescapable reciprocity, the signifier starts to refer to a disenchanted universe of the signified, the common denominator of the real world, towards which no-one any longer has the least obligation." [Baudrillard 1993, pg 50]**

Restrictions on the use of signs, the use of what Baudrillard terms "obligatory signs" still exist in what for Baudrillard is the third order of simulacra. Restricted signs include police and armed forces uniforms, official identity cards, and passports. These are signs which are obliged to be honest, obliged to play their part in mediating a social relation between individuals. The uniforms of opposing armies

act as signs in this sense, while 'bonding' may not be an appropriate term for warfare, Baudrillard's notion of semiotically mediated reciprocity is certainly applicable to the way in which uniforms carry with them an obligation to enter a reciprocal social relationship - although in this case, a highly destructive one. Uniforms, however, tend to be much less affected by fashion than civilian dress. The Danish army in the Second World War were equipped with a type of great coat introduced in 1865, and the longevity of the uniforms of the Swiss Guard and the Beefeaters is well known. The semiotic 'honesty' of these signs would seem to inhere in their being distinct from the general circulation system of fashion. It would seem therefore more reasonable to argue that the contemporary simulacra is one in which the different orders of signification described by Baudrillard co-exist in a complex and somewhat unstable semiotic combinatory.

We have seen that for Baudrillard the pre-Renaissance order of restricted signification was one in which sign use was heavily policed, yet by contrast he argues that the first order of simulacra, the signifiatory order from the Renaissance to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was one in which the sign was emancipated to circulate as the counterfeit - just as long as the difference between the real and the counterfeit could be distinguished. The counterfeit, whether it was a false shirt front, stucco ornamentation or an automaton, was regarded as a game with nature, a mirror image of a given original. The licensing of the counterfeit was the beginning of fashion, the beginning of an order in which signs could be brought together in a combinatory according to the dictates of wealth and taste. It is at this point in Baudrillard's schema that clothing becomes fashion and becomes a source of pleasure. Fashion is a game to be played - at least by those who have the wherewithal to do so - and clothes are freed from their obligation to signify their

wearers' social status. Tseelon [Ed Kellner 1994] notes that the freeing of clothing from an obligation to be a 'honest' sign of social status caused some concern among the upper classes, leading to efforts to police clothing and thereby eradicate fashion:

**“A petition to King Edward III from the House of Commons complaining that common men had begun to wear fabrics which did not fit their rank or income resulted in the legislation of the first sumptuary law defining precisely the type and quality of fabrics which could be worn by various classes. Similar laws continued to be passed until the sixteenth century with severity but little success. The sumptuary laws which attempted to regulate clothing practices along status lines, did not relate to style since rank was manifested in the quality of fabric, in the details, and in the choice of decoration rather than in different styles.” [Ed. Kellner 1994, pg 121]**

In Baudrillard's terms, such legislation was an expression of a fear of the false, a fear that a divinely inspired social order could be subverted by those who used signs to which they were not entitled by birth or by wealth. However, once the counterfeit was established, there was little that could be done to prevent people from playing with styles and adopting some features of the appearance of their social 'superiors'. The fact that style was not subject to legislation is interesting as fashion in clothing is concerned with style, with the cut and arrangement of clothes as much as their quality and fabric. Tseelon's historical perspective should be taken as qualifying Baudrillard's notion of a sweeping and fairly sudden change from an order of restricted signification to the free for all of the counterfeit and the original. Fashion in this era is an area of struggle as the bourgeoisie used such counterfeits as stucco to reveal **“the unlimited potential of the new class”** [Baudrillard 1993, pg 51] as soon as it had fractured the old aristocracy's grip on

the social and signifiatory orders. For the bourgeoisie, the counterfeit, the 'false' sign was not a problem of truth and falsehood but a sign of its power to remake the world in its image, a sign that the old fixed order had been broken and that a new class was gaining the ascendant. Fashion is that which celebrates the arrival of the bourgeoisie and the first traces of a social order that was to be based on a system of the reproduction of commodity exchange.

The consolidation of the bourgeoisie's social ascendancy was further re-enforced by the introduction of the technics of mass production in Western Europe and American. The new technics of production led not only to a vast increase in the quantity of goods produced but also to a fundamental change in the signifiatory function of objects. If the bourgeoisie's use of the counterfeit is understood as its semiotic remodelling of the world to demonstrate its (political) mastery of the forces of production and signification, the second order of simulation can be regarded as the culmination of the process of displacing a restricted 'semio-social' order for one that is generated not by the anterior real but by the unlimited powers and potential of production. In the second order of simulacra, as we have seen, abstract forces of production are manifested in the serial production of commodities in a regime of signification that has fundamentally altered the structure of signification from one based on the distinction between a original object and its counterfeit to one based on the difference between mass produced commodity-signs:

**“A new generation of signs and objects arises with the Industrial Revolution - signs with no caste tradition that will never have known restrictions on their status, and which will never have to be counterfeits, since from the outset they will be products on a gigantic scale. The problem of their specificity and**

**their origin is no longer posed: technics is their origin, they have meaning only within the dimension of the industrial simulacrum.” [Baudrillard 1993, pg 55]**

The origin of the mass produced sign is the power and potential of technics. The sign no longer acts as the image of a natural referent which governs its meaning, meaning is now entirely located within the serial production of signs that circulate as commodities. In this order of simulacra, all objects, all sign-forms, are potentially available for use and consumption by all individuals, and fashion assumes the status of a socio-economic dynamic. Baudrillard’s approach to fashion in his earlier writings reflects this view of fashion. The development of his genealogy of simulacra adds a historical or diachronic dimension to the essentially synchronic analysis of his earlier works. Within the industrial simulacrum, the meaning of objects and signs is governed by difference, and fashion is a process of inventing and recycling commodity-signs to ensure ever increasing levels of commodity consumption. The sign, for Baudrillard, in this ‘modernist’ order of production is debased, it does not refer beyond a ‘relational’ regime of meaning to the ‘truth’ of an anterior referent, and therefore it loses its privileged position as an index of the real. However, the world of the second order of simulacra is not one in which class distinctions have been annulled by the de-restriction of sign consumption, rather it is a world in which fashion becomes a mark of difference, a sign of distinction.

*The System of Objects* devotes much space to the concrete analysis of these differences, or rather how relations of difference between objects are translated into social distinctions. Colours, textures, materials become signs of ‘taste’, signs of social standing, signs of one’s ‘personal’ identity. This process of distinction through difference has, according to Tseelon, its origins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when

serial production further threatened the semiotic distinctions between classes and the strategies adopted by the 'upper' classes to respond to this threat to social demarcation:

**“The threats to the traditional social order encouraged the development of an alternative, more subtle, system of demarcation. In an attempt to distinguish the aristocracy by lineage from the nouveaux riches, this system anchored certain sartorial practices to moral values. For example, the concept of “gentility”, developed in the nineteenth century by the landed gentry to distinguish the “genuine” from the “pretend”, encapsulated this code of noblesse oblige. This code held that to be a “lady” was a standard of conduct which included rules of etiquette, elegance, and subtlety. “Those of birth and education learned to distinguish between good taste and sham.” Bright tints and clashing combinations were vulgar by their breach of certain rules of harmony and propriety.” [Ed. Kellner 1994, pg 123]**

Here taste becomes morality, a call to distinguish the difference between the true and the false. Social demarcation becomes based on a 'reading' of the details of one's appearance as a sign of rightness or pretence. The cut of a suit, the colour of a tie or blouse, and the quality of clothes become small but vital signs of social standing. Someone acting above his or her station in life could be detected by not knowing the nuances of dress codes, by lapses in taste. As Tseelon demonstrates, and as *The System of Objects* confirms, the use of restricted signs, the limiting of sign circulation to the *cognoscenti*, was part and parcel of the semio-social order of what Baudrillard dubs the second order of simulacra. There was no total emancipation of signs in this era, just as - as has been shown earlier - there is no total emancipation of the sign in an unrestricted semiosis in our own era of postmodern capitalism. Fashion as a socio-economic dynamic is based on turning

differences into distinctions, the cut of a suit may be 'in' or 'out' of fashion, but it will always have a place in the relational combinatoriality of fashion. Even clothes and objects which apparently reject fashion find a place within its combinatoriality, they function as the second term of the binary of the fashionable and unfashionable, or they are 'recycled' and reconstituted as the fashionable. An example of this are turn-ups on trousers, they first appeared as a fashion feature in the 1920s and became a standard fitting on trousers until the end of the 1950s, when they were relegated to the status of unfashionable. Despite a brief revival in the 1970s, turn-ups were not recycled as fashionable until the mid 1980s, and they continue to be regarded as fashionable at the time of writing. The story of turn-ups illustrates the commutability, the reversibility that Baudrillard came to regard as a structural feature of the combinatoriality of fashion by the time he came to write *Symbolic Exchange and Death*.

This book, as well as including his genealogy of simulacra, also includes a reflection on the nature and function of fashion that is among the most important statements of Baudrillard's radical analysis of signification and the circulation of signs within what he would argue is no longer a social order based on the political economy of production but a 'semio-society' governed by the reproduction of signs. The third order of simulacra as depicted in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* is one in which signs have been emancipated to the point that they are no longer referential, but are part of a vast aleatory semiurgy. The position of fashion in this semiurgy is a development of those put forward in *The System of Objects* and *The Consumer Society*. Baudrillard argues that fashion is dependent on modernity, it is dependent on a socio-historical schema of **"rupture, progress and innovation"** [Baudrillard 1993, pg 89], a framework in which the modern (the fashionable) is conceived of as

that which supersedes from the traditional. Fashion here is essentially innovation, a dialectics of the new and the old. However, Baudrillard goes on to reassert the position he took in *The Consumer Society* by arguing that a schema of rupture and innovation is no longer applicable to fashion in the third order of simulacra.

Baudrillard regards fashion as that in which rupture between different old and new styles, old and new objects, and the continuous recycling of objects are complementary, the two aspects of the same combinatory and the same code:

**“The dialectic of rupture very quickly becomes the dynamics of amalgam and recycling. In politics, in technics, in art and in culture it is defined by the exchange rate that the system can tolerate without alteration to its fundamental order. Consequently fashion doesn’t contradict any of this: it very clearly and simultaneously announces the *myth* of change: since it is produced through the play of models and distinctive oppositions, and is therefore an order which gives no precedence to the code of tradition.”**

**[Baudrillard 1993, pg 90 - author’s italics]**

The notion of fashion as an arena of change, that which is based on a distinction between innovation and accumulation, the new and the old, is relegated here to a ‘myth’, an appearance of change within a combinatory that does not change in itself. The example of FIAT’s decision to reduce the production period of its models is example of innovation that is accommodated by a system of production and re[production without challenging its fundamental principles, its code. Fashion is ‘produced’ at the level of ‘myth’, the level of distinction between the model and series, the new and the old, but this level of production is only a ‘moment’ of a far greater schema of reproduction, a schema which has reproduces by amalgamating the traditional and the ruptural together as signs. Fashion in the third order of simulacra is essentially spectacle. Baudrillard writes of it as a simulation of change

as opposed to the 'real' of change:

**“Spectacle is our fashion, an intensified and reduplicated sociality enjoying itself aesthetically, the drama of change in place of change.” [Baudrillard 1993, pg 90]**

Fashion is the movement of signs, their distribution in a system of circulation.

Fashion has become, for Baudrillard, a signifiatory rather than economic category at this stage of his work, and his mature conception of fashion as a combinatory, a medium of sign exchange, which is equivalent to the combinatory of political economy. This combinatory is one in which signs, as we have seen, proliferate in an endless play, a play which is not determined by any original anterior referent as in the first order of simulacra, nor by the referent understood as abstract forces of production, but only by the models, from which signs are continually reproduced.

Value in this regime of signification becomes entirely structural: value is difference, the relation between the terms of binary oppositions rather than value predicated on labour, natural scarcity, use value or the economic exchange value of products. In this order of signification, only the fundamental binary structure of the codes governing the formation of models and the relation between models and simulations can be regarded as a source of value, and their value is, for Baudrillard, purely signifiatory. At this point, the categories of political economy, and its key notion of a source of value anterior to signification, collapse as the social, economic and cultural spheres are reduced to the status of a combination of signs, a play of signifiers.

In this order of simulacra, the model, or rather the difference between it and the reproduced simulations that it informs, is the only reference for signs. In this order, the real is no longer the ontological foundation and source on which, and

from which, signification is produced. It is a situation in which reproduction (of signs and all other commodities) has fully emerged from the chrysalis of production:

**“In its infinite reproduction, the system puts an end to the myth of its origin and to all referential values it has itself secreted in the course of its process. By putting an end to the myth of its origin, it puts an end to its internal contradictions (there is no longer a real or a referential to which to oppose them) and also puts an end to the myth of its end, the revolution itself”**

**[Baudrillard 1993, pg 60]**

Instead of production, which is essentially a linear process leading to commodity accumulation prior to exchange for profit and consumption and therefore a process which is determinate in that it has a point of origin and a goal, reproduction is indeterminate in nature. As an indeterminate process, reproduction has no clear origin, it is a delivery system, a medium by which signs are circulated and consumed in postmodern society. The notion of determination is one which is a process, event or object must be related to a source which is not that object, event or process; in this sense, every determined system or object is negated by the presence of something which is its other, and which defines its nature and function. The undetermined nature of reproduction, is according to Baudrillard, means that the real cannot be used as a ground on which to distinguish between the true and the false. Zygmunt Bauman describes this world of reproduced simulations in a passage which is worth reproducing at length as one in which such hitherto key distinctions are displaced by simulations which cannot be conceived in terms of true and false, real and mystificatory:

**“Simulation, we are told, ‘is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance’. In simulation - this crucial, universal, perhaps exclusive, mode in which all things today are - the territory no longer precedes the map. It is**

rather the map that precedes the territory. The map 'engenders the territory'. Well, you would say, one can agree or disagree about this proposition, but at least one knows what the proposition is about and how to find out whether it is true or not. Alas, your satisfaction is, to say the least, premature.

Simulation, you think, consists in *pretending* that something is not what it *really* is; you are not alarmed because you know how to tell pretence from reality. The simulation Baudrillard talks about is not like that, however. It effaces the very difference between true and false, real and imaginary. We no longer have the means of testing pretence against reality, or just to know which is which. There is no exit from our quandary." [Bauman 1992, pgs 150 -151 - author's italics]

In simulation distinctions between the true and the false, and the real and its representations, is collapsed. It does not support the categories, the codes that would allow the bourgeoisie and other dominant social groups of the second order of simulacra to tell the 'real' from the 'fake', the genuine man or woman of 'quality' from the impostor. Baudrillard does not accept that there is a 'real' world that provides the ultimate source of meaning in signification. For Baudrillard, the ceaseless reproduction of signs governed by simulation models leads to a situation in which the real is displaced because capital has no use for it. Baudrillard argues that capital no longer requires the real as its alibi and that the categories of political economy are now themselves only a simulacrum circulating among other simulacra, rather than being an index of the fundamental process of production. In the third order of simulacra production is only ever a moment in a vast schema of reproduction.

Fashion is a privileged locus within this order of the reproduction of simulacra.

Baudrillard describes it as that in which signifiers are freed from their signifieds in a asemic combinatory:

**“In fashion, as in the code, signifieds come unthreaded [*se defiler*], and the parades of the signifier [*les defiles du significant*] no longer lead anywhere. The signifier/signified distinction is erased..... “ [Baudrillard 1993, pg 87 - italics in original]**

Fashion is therefore freed any social reference, it is not that which indexes differences between classes, differences between age groups or ethnic groups, it a 'pure' system of combination and re-combination that is always already reproduced, it is that which denies any form of poesis, it is the antithesis of creativity.

Baudrillard refers to this process of reproduction as a **“mad and meticulous recurrence” [Baudrillard 1993, pg 87]** in which there is no structural distinction between sign and referent, signifier and signified, but a structure of minimal difference, a structure in which one fashion object is what is it is, assumes its value, only because of the difference between it and all the other object -signs in the combinatory. Fashion is ultimately closed: it does not relate to the social, and displaces the social by a system in which signs relate to signs, rather people relating to people. At times, Baudrillard's theorising appears to wish to substitute the human with a world of signs: a world in which signs relate to each other, combine with each other, and contest for position within the global combinatory. However, even if it is accepted that the subject is constituted rather constitutive, and that it is the product of a given social and signifiatory order, it appears odd and extreme to displace concepts of social and signifiatory interaction by human beings with a concept of signs having a monopoly of agency. In Baudrillard's later writings on simulation (*Symbolic Exchange and Death*, *Simulations* and *The Ecstasy of Communication*), it appears people are merely the terminals or receptors

for the procession of simulacra. Here Baudrillard takes anti-humanism to a new extreme, and yet this ferocious anti-humanism seems inhabited by an implicit nostalgia for the lost full presence of the real and a human's subject which was the master of that real. There is a sense of loss pervading Baudrillard's work, the second order of simulacra, the freeing of the productive forces, seems to be a disaster of emancipation, a disaster which destroyed the old plenitude of the real which guaranteed the validity of all forms of representation. There is a high level of anguish in Baudrillard's writings about the displacement of the original, his work reads as being somehow an elegy for a stable world of referents which has been fatally undermined by the technics of production and reproduction. Baudrillard's pessimism is worth comparing with the optimism in relation to technical reproducibility and its impact on the 'aura' of art works that is displayed in Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* in which some of the new aesthetic and communicative possibilities of technical, in this case photographic, reproduction are outlined:

**“For example, in photography, process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angle at will. And photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, can capture processes that escape natural vision. Secondly, technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or phonograph record.” [Benjamin 1973, pg 214]**

The idea that serial production and the technical reproduction of objects and/or images can lead to new experiences, new understandings and new pleasures is

alien to Baudrillard. The potential of technically based production and reproduction to expand the range of an original, to bring an original object into new social and cultural situations is never acknowledged in his writings. Baudrillard's entire theoretical edifice is built upon a sense of loss, of the destruction of a stable signifying order resting on a stable ontological order, rather than on a sense of the new possibilities of signification inaugurated by the rise of mass production and the potential for more than semiotic 'emancipation', which the Marxist tradition regards as the spectre that has haunted capitalist development throughout the last century and a half.

In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard continues his exploration of the analogies between political economy and signification by arguing that 'fashion' is a general "floatation" which follows the same logic that political economists would discern in the floatation of currencies:

**"Fashion is not a *drifting* of signs - it is their *floatation*, in the sense in which monetary signs are floated today. This floatation in the economic order is recent: it requires that 'primitive accumulation' be everywhere finished, that an entire cycle of dead labour be completed (behind money, the whole economic order will enter into this general relativity). Now this process has been managed for a long time within the order the order of signs where primitive accumulation is indeed anterior, if not always already given, and fashion expresses the already achieved stage of an accelerated and limitless circulation of a fluid and recurrent combinatory of signs, which is equivalent to the instantaneous and mobile equilibrium of floating monies." [Baudrillard 1993, pg 92 - author's italics]**

For the mature Baudrillard, fashion is not a arena in which signs drift aimlessly, it is

the very locus of the universal commutability of signs that marks the third order of simulacra. Fashion is, in Baudrillard's terms, the privileged site of sign exchange in postmodern society. Fashion is not just a simple surface play, a drifting, of signs, it is more akin to a vast market mechanism in which signs that are no longer tied to referents are exchanged in a process that is mimicked or parodied by the exchange of currencies that are no longer tied to the gold standard. Fashion is an exemplary practice that defines, while being defined by, a society informed by a regime of signification that no longer functions in terms of signifier and signified, representation and underlying reality, created image and pre-given truth. Fashion is a part of the procession of simulacra, it is a carnival of simulation. At this point in his theorising, Baudrillard has effectively freed fashion from its obligation to the social by arguing that it is purely a semiotic phenomena, something that takes place entirely within the order of signification. Fashion is about combining and re-combining signs. Whether an object within 'fashion' is a coat, a dress or a new philosophy or artistic movement, it is something that has become a sign, and it is something that has its place in a totalised combinatory system. Fashion, for Baudrillard, is conversion into a sign. Fashion does not inhere within an object (the tail fins of a car are not fashionable in their basic material existence, in the use of metal that is all they denote) but it does inhere within signs, within the meaning that a particular object has within the system of differences that constitutes fashion (a tail fin is fashionable because it connotes fashion as modernity, because it signifies the car as an example of fashion). At this point, Baudrillard's account of fashion is that a pure semiotic combinatory, a system in which all objects can circulate and be exchanged for each other. Fashion, in this account, is a totalised system, there is no point from which to contest fashion as a social dominant, no point at which it can be challenged.

Baudrillard expressly separates the 'recycling' of fashion from the ambiguous reversibility of symbolic exchange. Fashion is a spectacle, the 'myth' of change rather than change itself, while symbolic exchange is always, for Baudrillard, a potlatch, a gift and a challenge, a 'praxis' that is always capable of instituting radical and profound change. Fashion is a medium of reproduction, a medium which Baudrillard regards as an exemplar of a combinatory in which value does not rest on utility or the exchange value of an object, but on its place in a system of differences. It has already been noted that Baudrillard follows Saussure in regarding something's value as arising from its place in the system that constitutes it, rather than in any qualities that may be inherent within the object. Value in the third order of simulacra is about an object's place in a combinatorial system. Fashion is not ever an arena in which any form of radical challenge or actual rupture can take place. Baudrillard stresses that fashion is not a locus for symbolic exchange, but is that which annuls the profound challenge of the symbolic and the 'primitive' in a critique of a Vogue article which presents fashion as a form of 'potlatch', a feast, a squandering that symbolically challenges the economic and any notion of utility:

**"We know, however, that advertising too wants a 'feast of consumption, the media a 'feast of information', the markets a 'feast of production', etc. The art market and horse races can also be taken for a potlatch - 'Why not?' asks Vogue. We would like to see a functional squandering everywhere so as to bring about symbolic destruction. Because of the extent to which the economic, shackled to the functional, has imposed its principle of utility, anything which exceeds it quickly takes on an air of play and futility. It is hard to acknowledge that the law of value extends well beyond the economic,**

**and that its true task today is the jurisdiction of all models. Wherever there are models, there is an imposition of the law of value, repression by signs and the repression of signs themselves. This is why there is a radical difference between the symbolic ritual and the signs of fashion. In primitive cultures signs openly circulate over the entire range of 'things', there has not yet been any 'precipitation' of a signified, nor therefore of a reason or a truth of the sign. The real - the most beautiful of our connotations - does not exist." [Baudrillard 1993, pgs 94 - 95]**

This passage is one of Baudrillard's clearest statement on the nature and function of fashion. It is system of objects that become signs and then circulate as such. These signs are taken as referring to a 'real' when they are reproductions of a model, and their value is only their differential relation to that model. Fashion is not, for Baudrillard, an arena of transgression because it is a semiotic combinatory and not a not something which semiotically mediates social and cultural relations. It is at this point that Baudrillard abandons any notion of political activism in the face of universal simulation and the universal displacement of the real, which he believes render such activism into a futile simulation of political challenge.

Baudrillard's refusal to regard fashion as an arena of social exchange marks out the key difference between him and such theorists as Dick Hebdige and Angela McRobbie. Both of them see fashion as an arena of contestation, a locus within which prevailing discourse can be, and are, challenged by what Foucault dubbed a 'reverse discourse', a mobilisation of signs that affirms a identity that contests given notions of social identity. Hebdige identifies the irruption of punk into the managed world of fashion as a moment when fashion as a combinatory was challenged by fashion, or rather anti-fashion, as a form of bricolage, a poesis comprising the

elements of earlier ways of dressing:

**“There was a chaos of quiffs and leather jackets, brothel creepers and winkle pickers, plimsolls and paka macs, moddy crops and skinhead strides, drainpipes and vivid socks, bum freezers and bovver boots - all kept “in place” and “out of time” by the spectacular adhesives: the safety pins and clothes pegs, the bondage straps and bits of string which attracted so much horrified and fascinated attention.” [Hebdige 1979, pg 26]**

This bricolage, this refusal to accept that given paradigms relate in a given order in given syntagms, was, for Hebdige, an act of contestation, a challenge, even a form of potlatch. Hebdige's account of punk in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* is one that celebrates the way in which the codes of fashion, the codes of appearance, can be subverted and/or used to signify or construct a non-conformist social identity. Hebdige regards punk as a serious game played with an established sign system: punk was, for him, political in so far as it attempted to undermine accepted notions of appearance and behaviour. The accepted syntagm of jacket or pullover, trousers, skirt or jeans, shirt or blouse was undermined by a combination of paradigmatic elements that did not 'go' together - dress shirts were worn with bondage trousers and plimsolls or summer dresses were worn over high Doc Martens boots. Sometimes the entire notion of the accepted paradigm was undermined when bin-liners were pressed into service as clothes, extending their use value and displacing the conventional codes of dress at a stroke. Punk, in Hebdige's account, was a sort of revolt fought out on the plane of style, which is the plane of signs and their combination.

This is not to say that punk was pure rebellion, heir to the heretic tradition described in Greil Marcus' *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth*

*Century*, and for some of its adherents it was a certainly only a fashion movement to be discarded as soon as the next trend emerged, and not a something that was a commitment to punk's potent combination of Situationist or pro-situ politics and existential nihilism. However, this does not mean that punk was something that would always have been recuperated as fashion, as a new stylistic combination among others. The shock of punk certainly wore off, and it did become a fashion as opposed to a non-conformist way of life, but its irruption sent out cultural shock waves which are still being felt twenty-three years after the event. Punk was a challenge, an act of disruption based on reassembling, *detourning*, signs in a way that was a refusal on the part of working class and lower middle class young people to play their allotted social roles and a way of responding to the social and cultural conjuncture of the mid to late 1970s:

**“The punks appropriated the rhetoric of crisis which had filled the airwaves and the editorials throughout this period and translated it into tangible (and visible) terms. In the gloomy, apocalyptic ambience of the late 1970s - with massive unemployment, with the ominous violence of the Notting Hill Carnival, Grunwick, Lewisham and Ladywood - it was fitting that the punks should present themselves as ‘degenerates’; as signs of the highly publicised decay which perfectly represented the atrophied condition of Great Britain. The various stylistic ensembles adopted by the punks were undoubtedly expressive of a genuine aggression, frustration and anxiety.”**  
[Hebdige 1979, pg 87]

Hebdige goes on to note that punk's success lay in its ability to **“symptomize a whole cluster of contemporary problems”** [Hebdige 1979, pg 87], its ability to present a signify a response to a (sense of) crisis in the social, economic and cultural spheres. Punk was a response to a conjuncture of circumstances that

created a subculture which was semiotically distinguished from wider British society, and it was therefore something that permitted individuals to take part in a collective act of *producing* new social identities. Punk's irruption can therefore be regarded as a form of production, as opposed to a moment within a general economy of reproduction. Punk anti-fashion was an expression of an anterior social and cultural reality that was not simply a reflection or mirror of that society, but the creation of a semiotic that was a mediated expression of a troubled social position.

This was a position that was both dependent on the objective class status of punks and their vehement rejection of that position, it was a position that rested on the quotidian realities of 1970s working class life and the potential of something else - even if that something else was the void. Hebdige's account of punk performance highlights this central contradiction from which the punk identity was mad, when he writes of the way in which punk groups such as the Clash followed the European *avante garde* in critically exploring the relationship between audience and performers:

**“Most significantly, they attempted both physically and in terms of lyrics and life-style to move closer to their audiences. This in itself is by no means unique: the boundary between artist and audience has often stood as a metaphor in revolutionary aesthetics (Brecht, the surrealists, Dada, Marcuse, etc.) for that larger and more intransigent barrier which separates art and the dream from reality and life under capitalism.” [Hebdige 1979, pg 110]**

This contradiction between a conjuncture that is anterior to signification and the production of punk's iconoclastic semiotic operates in a conceptual landscape which is foreign to that of Baudrillard. Baudrillard's concept of fashion is one of a perfect and all encompassing combinatory which is immune from disruption or

detournement, it is beyond any form of challenge and contestation. Fashion, for Baudrillard, no longer has any *other*. Hebdige's account of punk, however, suggests that fashion is more than simply a procession of simulacra or a combinatory of signs without referents. His account reminds its readers of the actual circumstances in which semiotic means are created, are produced. The reading of punk in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* is suggestive in that it offers an opportunity to get out of the impasse which Baudrillard's theorising on fashion has reached. Punk is a form of production, albeit one that was seen as illicit, a moment in which a new and deviant semiotic was created, rather than an instance of fashion recycling itself. Punk was the production of social meanings that were outside fashion, and the attempts made to domesticise punk as fashion recounted by Hebdige bear witness to this:

**“For whatever reason, the inevitable glut of articles gleefully denouncing the latest punk outrage was counter-balanced by an equal number of items devoted to the small details of punk family life. For instance, the 15 October 1977 issue of *Woman's Own* carried an article entitled ‘Punks and Mothers’ which stressed the classless, fancy dress aspects of punk. Photographs depicting punks with smiling mothers, reclining next to a family pool, playing with the family dog, were placed above a text which dwelt on the ordinariness of individual punks; ‘It’s not as rocky horror as it appears’... ‘punk can be a family affair’... ‘punks as it happens are non-political’, and, most insidiously, albeit accurately, ‘Johnny Rotten is as big a household name as Hughie Green.’ [Hebdige 1979, pg 98]**

This attempt to recuperate punk attests to its being in some way, at some time, external to fashion comprehended as Baudrillard's totalised, universal combinatory of signs. Punk is the other of fashion: a form of production which (originally) took

place outside fashion understood as a commodity marketing mechanism and a semiotics of personal appearance, and which attacked its conventions by means of an aggressive use of pastiche and bricolage. This conception of punk both sets limits to the combinatory of fashion by rejecting its convention governed order of signification and its order of supercession and its periodic recycling of once unfashionable elements. It also suggests that reproduction is not the privileged term in the production/reproduction couplet. Production is the fundamental activity, it is the active creation of the human lebenswelt, the social and culture realms. Production both creates and nullifies, it is a praxis which should be regarded as a fundamental to any social and signifiatory order. It has the power to disrupt the reproduction of any socio-economic formation, while reproduction is not fundamental in this way in so far as it is only a that which makes possible any act of production. Reproduction is in a sense the repetition of production, the continuance of production, and it is dependant on production. Therefore, against Baudrillard's conception, fashion should be conceived of as a locus for the continued creation of the semiotics of appearance, a creation which is haunted by the possibility of disruption by signs that are not part of the ensemble of relations that constitute the combinatory of fashion at any particular moment.



Baudrillard's view of reproduction can be turned on its head. Instead of production as a 'moment' within a much greater scheme of reproduction, Hebdige's account of punk suggests that reproduction is always produced, any system of reproduction must be created and maintained as a system, and therefore production should be privileged over and above reproduction. The 'recycling' of elements that Baudrillard regards as the dominant characteristic of the fashion combinatory does not guarantee that the reproduction of object-signs has displaced

the production of commodities. It, rather, indicates that such a 'recycling' of elements is not a continual reproduction of sign-forms, but the production of new signifying meanings for existing objects. The notion that production has been displaced by the reproduction of simulacra is one that in seeking to counter the Marxist valorisation of production leads to a situation in which reproduction becomes all-encompassing, and the notion of creation, the idea that production can institute a radical break with existing conditions and constitute a new situation, is effectively nullified in Baudrillard's theorising. Baudrillard's animus against Marxism's ontological privileging of production and his rejection of the ontological and epistemological categories of critical theory leads to a model which is immune to disruption, a model which cannot conceive of the possibility of fundamental change to the existing social and signifying orders. At this point, Baudrillard's attempt to be more radical than Marxism fails on the political level, it offers no grounds on which action to institute fundamental change to the current order of power relation. It is a powerful analytical model, but one which is as much a victim of its own totalising, its refusal to accept that any given socio-economic regime produces real and fundamental contradictions that are the very possibility of radical and irreversible change. In this sense, the criticisms that Baudrillard made of Foucault's concept of power in *Forget Foucault* rebound on himself: his 'mature' theorising constructs a totality which cannot be disrupted that will always recuperate any disruptive praxis, and which has a fundamental stability which is at odds with the contradiction given nature of postmodern capitalism.

The limit of Baudrillard's theorising is that it presents a powerful analytic depiction of contemporary society which is carceral in nature: there is no place for reverse discourse, no place for contestation within the schema of simulacra. This

totalising tendency weakens Baudrillard's work by not allowing it to give a proper account of how social classes and groups often contest the prevailing social order and its regime of signification. In contrast, Dick Hebdige's work reveals the disruptive potential of subcultures and the limits to their capacity to produce a fundamental challenge to the prevailing signification order. Hebdige's treatment of punk is illuminating in that it shows that social and signification givens can be contested, that the bricolage of contemporary fashion is defined by a relation to that which is 'non-fashion', the other of fashion, and that this process is constitutive of social identities. Angela McRobbie's essay *The Role of the Ragmarket* in the collection *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* indicates that 'fashion' is itself not homogeneous, but an arena of conflict informed by notions of taste, propriety and the values of a given society. She identifies the 1960s and early 1970s 'counter-culture' as that which promoted the 'recycling' of the detritus of haberdashery and accessories:

**“Military uniforms were first found along side the overalls and great-coats in army surplus stores and on second-hand rails of shops such as ‘Granny Takes a Trip’, in the King’s Road. Metal-rimmed glasses added a further element to that theme in the counter-culture suggesting an interest in the old, the used, the overtly cheap and apparently unstylish.” [McRobbie 1994, pg 137]**

McRobbie notes Stewart Hall's comments that this movement away from fashion as style, as the 'new', and a consequent 'recycling' of objects which were once unwelcome signs of deprivation, as both **“an identification with the poor”** and **“a disavowal of conventional middle-class smartness”** [cited in McRobbie 1994, pg 137]. It was a moment in which 'fashion' became a 'recycling' of signs, a 'recycling' which was not that described by Baudrillard, but a 're-writing' of the

meaning of objects. The semiotic value of a military great-coat on a 'hippie' is entirely different to its meaning when it was first issued and worn by service personnel. The great coat becomes a paradigm in a new syntagm, a syntagm which connotes the rejection of the values of smartness, orderliness and imposed discipline that were its original meaning. In this instance, fashion is a game of bricolage in which items are combined in a manner that is at odds with the conventional dress code.

This creation of a social, and therefore a personal identity, does not have to be one of violent contestation, an attempt to shock, as McRobbie rightly states. It can also be an attempt to find something which is regarded as 'authentic' in the sense that Baudrillard sees the peasant's table as being authentic. This is an attempt to recuperate use value along the lines suggested by Susan Willis, an attempt to find an object which is the locus of non-reified human relations, an object which stands in some way outside of commodity capitalism:

**“For the generation whose memories had not been blunted altogether by the dizzy rise of post-war consumerism, markets for old clothes and jumble sales in the 1960s remained a terrifying reminder of the stigma of poverty, the shame of ill-fitting clothing, and the fear of disease through infestation, rather like buying a second-hand bed.**

**Hippy preferences for old coats, crepe dresses and army great-coats, shocked the older generation precisely for this reason. But they were not acquired merely for shock value. Those items favoured by the hippies reflected an interest in pure, natural and authentic fabrics and a repudiation of the man-made synthetic materials found in high street fashion. The pieces**

**of clothing sought out by hippy girls tended to be antique lace petticoats, pure silk blouses, crepe dresses, velvet skirts and pure wool 1940s-styled coats. In each case, these conjured up a time when the old craft values prevailed and when one person saw through his or her production from start to finish.” [McRobbie 1994, pg 143]**

In this instance, fashion is an attempt to move away from the commodity form to consumption of objects that have little or no exchange value when compared to high-street fashion items, but which retain their use-value. Fashion here is not simply a combinatory of sign-objects, but a moment in which the very meaning of consumer capitalism is contested by an attempt to re-appropriate use value by the ‘recycling’ of old and hitherto unwanted clothing. This indicates that fashion is not a single, continuous combinatory of signs but a arena of conflicting codes and discourses, a shifting locus which is informed by human praxis. This is not to say that fashion is inherently revolutionary, but a reminder that fashion is itself fashioned from production, from praxis, and as such cannot be regarded as a total and stable combinatory. However, the processes of recuperation through which the semiotically disruptive appearance of hippies or punks is reduced to the ‘hippy-look’ or the ‘punk-look’ should not be forgotten, fashion as a mechanism of consumer capitalism can also seek to recuperate previously outmoded styles, as Baudrillard notes. Here the irruption of punk becomes reduced to a sign-form, a simulation, something that can be used and discarded, and which does not reflect any social identity other than that of a consumer.

Baudrillard’s theorising on fashion’s weakness in that it denies a ground for the contestation of established orders implies its strength, that of an awareness of the recuperative power of postmodern capitalism. Any sign, any image, no matter how

subversive it may once have been, can be recuperated as a commodity, that compound of economic exchange value and sign exchange value. Baudrillard's work is a stark reminder of the way in which any event can be co-opted as a paradigm in the syntagm of fashion, that it can be reduced to a moment in the general circulation of capitalist exchange. The recuperative power of capitalism, its ideological ability to de-radicalise once potent signs and diffuse them through our culture remains one of its central bulwarks, a mechanism for the domestication for any cultural phenomena that threatens the prevailing social and cultural order. Baudrillard's theory of fashion as a combinatory of simulacra provides an excellent account of the 'imperialism' of fashion, an 'imperialism' that reflects the impulse of capitalism to annex every area of our conscious and unconscious lives to its pursuit of capital accumulation. The combinatory of fashion is one in which sign exchange value and economic exchange value are privileged over and above use value, which is displaced as fashion accelerates "obsolescence of desirability" by both cancelling the old, the existing, by means of introducing the new, and by recycling the elements of the combinatory so that what was once obsolescent is recast as the 'new', or rather as a sign of the new. Despite the power of this analysis, and its obvious usefulness in supporting critiques of consumer capitalism, it concentrates too much on fashion as a structural system, and therefore, does not have give a sense that, unlike Hebdige and McRobbie, Baudrillard is concerned with the people who have to negotiate the combinatory of fashion. His later writings convey no sense of how human subjects are constructed and positioned, how they are produced, by the structures of wider capitalist society, and how fashion relates to the ongoing production of human beings as workers and/or consumers. The detailed analysis of consumerism that was the *raison d'être* of *The System of Objects* and *The Consumer Society* has been lost to a theorising which seems

more intent on producing theoretical structures rather than trying to comprehend the quotidian experiences of consumer that mark our era. Baudrillard in the course of his work on fashion has produced a suggestive account of the combinatory of fashion and the effect of third order of simulacra in that domain, but he has become unwilling to get 'his hands dirty' by looking at how fashion is appropriated and consumed, how it plays a role in constituting subjects, and how it therefore retains the capacity to be a site of cultural conflict.

The ultimate failure of Baudrillard's project is highlighted by his work on fashion. Starting out from the impulse to reinvent political radicalism that characterised the 1960s and early 1970s period in France, Baudrillard attempted to create an analysis of consumer capitalism which was based on the idea that commodities were not simply bifurcated between use value and exchange value, but that they were also their sign exchange value, their value as signifieds which could culturally appropriated and consumed, This project identified a weakness in the orthodox Marxist conception of the commodity, a conception which did not properly account for the commodity as a sign-form. Although Marxists such as Susan Willis and Judith Williamson have developed impressive accounts of the semiotics of the commodity form, and in Willis' case have argued that the semiotics of the commodity are integral to its status as a commodity, much Marxist theory has not appreciated the fundamental importance of signification to the development of commodity in late capitalism. Baudrillard's attempt to recast the critique of the commodity form as a critique of semiotics, a critique of its reduction of meaning to an ambiguous exchange between the sign and referent, signifier and signified, was a bold and note worthy attempt to demonstrate that commodity capitalism is about signification, and that as a mode of production it is dependent on signification and

sign exchange. Unfortunately, Baudrillard's predilection for constructing abstract theoretical structures has meant that the genuine radical impulse in his work is checked by its inability to suggest any way of transcending or even contesting the current social order. His work contains nothing that indicates any way forward for the inhabitants of the third order of simulacra, it is survey of the ruins of the world of referents, an implicit elegy for the real as the ultimate source of meaning and guarantor of signification. Baudrillard remains a radical, but his is a radicalism without hope. His radicalism is manifest in his relentless reduction of all social and cultural phenomena to its structural elements, to its code. Baudrillard, although usually described as very much a postmodernist, is actually a through-going structuralist, systematically developing universal structures which are supposed to account for the entire range of human social and cultural activity. His work is in that sense far more reductionist than that of the most orthodox Marxist. While an orthodox Marxist will reduce all superstructural social activity to an expression of an event in the economic base, Baudrillard reduces all social and cultural phenomena to the reproduction of simulation; and whereas, following Althusser, Marxism has developed conceptions of the relative autonomy of the superstructure, Baudrillard does not ultimately regard any area of society or culture as being relatively free of the generating and determining code. In this sense, Baudrillard is closer to pre-Althusserian base-superstructure Marxism than both his opponents and supporters have assumed, his theoretical world is governed by a rigorous structuralism which belies his the post-structuralist and postmodernist appearance of his work.

In the light of the comments made in the preceding paragraphs, it is perfectly reasonable to ask what value there is in Baudrillard's work. The next chapter will seek to conclude this thesis by arguing that Baudrillard should read in the way that

he himself recommends reading Marx and Freud, that is against the grain.

Baudrillard argues in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* that the residual value of Marx and Freud is only found when they are pitted against themselves, when the conceptual apparatus of their work is turned on itself. Following this, the conclusion will argue that there is much in Baudrillard's work which is of value, and that can inform critical theory, but that for this to be appreciated Baudrillard must be set against Baudrillard. Finally it will argue that Baudrillard's work when read against itself, provides an outline sketch of a theoretical conception of the relation of signification and economics that that has great potential for development within Marxist theory.

## **Conclusion: Baudrillard *Contra* Baudrillard**

In the Preface to *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard contends that it is now necessary to go beyond the theoretical horizons of Marxism, psychoanalysis and semiotics. He attempts this by setting the fundamental terms of key authors in these disciplines against themselves. Such a reading would concentrate on the 'subversive elements' within the theoretical edifices of psychoanalysis, ethnology and semiotics:

**"Indeed we must switch the targets of each of these three theories, and turn Mauss against Mauss, Saussure against Saussure and Freud against Freud. The principle of reversibility (the counter-gift) must be imposed against all the economonistic, psychologistic and structuralist interpretations for which Mauss paved the way. The Saussure of the Anagrams must be set against Saussurian linguistics, against even his own restricted hypotheses concerning the anagram. The Freud of the death drive must be pitched against every previous psychoanalytic edifice, and even Freud's version of the death drive." [Baudrillard 1993 pgs 1- 2]**

This strategy can, and should, be applied to Baudrillard as well if his work is to overcome the aporia which it had reached in its theorisation of signification as a pure combinatory of signs divorced from real referents. To regain its effectiveness as a radical theory of the role of signification in postmodern capitalism, Baudrillard's work has to be read against itself, against its own axiomatics. Baudrillard should be read *contra* Baudrillard. By this, it is meant that Baudrillard's account of signification as simulation should be turned back on itself so that his work can be juxtaposed with a Marxist critique of capitalism. This would treat Baudrillard's work in the sense that Susan Willis treated it, as an adjunct to a fundamentally Marxist

critique of capitalism, rather than as a fully blown alternative to Marxism. Reading Baudrillard against himself is an attempt to re-situate Baudrillard as a critical theorist, one whose work can, and should, be read as alongside Marxist critiques of commodity exchange and the generation of meaning in a society governed by commodity exchange and capital accumulation. However, this should not be taken as implying that Baudrillard's work can be made to be compatible with the tenets of Marxism, despite the neo-Marxism of his earliest publications. Baudrillard's theorising, as we have seen, rejects the very ontological foundations of Marxist and neo-Marxist theory, and only a wilfully inadequate reading of Baudrillard's work would support the argument that it can be annexed outright to Marxist and neo-Marxist critical theory. Baudrillard's later work remains outside the Marxist tradition, but this does not mean that Marxists can only react by denouncing Baudrillard as an apostate and/or postmodern nihilist. There is too much that is insightful and compelling in Baudrillard's work for it to be simply dismissed. Marxists need to confront Baudrillard's symbolic challenge by 'working through' his theories, and continue or begin a debate with his theorising and its grasp (despite the accompanying hyperbole) of the importance of simulation to postmodern capitalism.

As a way of expanding these arguments, let us review the development of Baudrillard's theoretical engagement with signification and political economy as it moves from a neo-Marxist critique of commodity consumption to a non-dialectical theoretical assault on capitalism as a code governing all forms of social meaning. In putting forward this position, Baudrillard invokes 'symbolic exchange' as the 'other' to capitalist commodity exchange. Baudrillard's move away from neo-Marxism towards what is perhaps best described as a poststructuralist radicalism is outlined in Chapter One of this thesis. For Baudrillard, the commodity is always a

sign with a sign value that equates to economic use value and a sign-exchange value that is analogous to economic exchange value. The commodity, as has been demonstrated by the Marxist writer Susan Willis, is therefore always already a sign form. A commodity is, as Willis shows, dependent on signification; it is only a commodity if it can be semiotically distinguished from its generic grouping.

Baudrillard's insistence that capitalism is both a mode of production and a mode of signification is an advance on the reductionist forms of Marxism because it recognises that signification is not secondary to the 'economic' base of production, and that it is an essential element within any social formation. For Baudrillard, the sign is capital's accomplice: its lack of ambiguity, its reduction of the scope of meaning by tying a given signifier to a given signified, and its consequent exclusion of any meanings that are not part of that privileged relationship, reduce the scope of social meaning to the horizon of capitalist commodity exchange. The condition that Baudrillard describes is one in which reification has intensified to the point that the structure of the commodity form is the very structure of semiotic exchange under capitalism. Baudrillard reaches this position because he argues that the 'real' as referent is an effect of the signifier rather than its ontological ground, and that the structure governing this process imposes its meaning and 're-models' the real according to its terms. For Baudrillard, postmodern capitalism is determined by its structures of signification. In taking this position, Baudrillard issues a fundamental challenge to the ontological tenets of orthodox Marxism, a challenge that rests on the conception of the sign as being constitutive of the 'real' rather than a mere reflection of the real.

However, Baudrillard's idea that capitalism remodels reality echoes the Marxist view that modes of production, reproduction and exchange transform what is

socially accepted as the real. His view that nineteenth century capitalism displaced the pre-industrial semiurgy of original and copy for one in which objects signified the abstract forces that were harnessed in their production. Using Baudrillard, it becomes possible to trace the way in which capitalism leads to ontological transformations, the metamorphosis of what we take to be the reality on which our lives as conscious social beings is grounded. Baudrillard's work graphically illustrates how the 'real', which is so often presented as a simple given, is in fact a construction, something that has never been natural but is an effect of the mode of production and signification. This is a corrective to the ontological essentialism that can permeate orthodox Marxist thinking, a corrective which is a stark reminder of the power of capital to remodel the very tenets of the real. Read in this way, Baudrillard's view of the third order of simulation as a combinatory of signs without real referents is a powerful but flawed depiction of postmodern capitalism, a capitalism that has no more use for the real but reproduces itself through the aleatory play of simulacra. Baudrillard's characterisation of a capitalist ontological order which consists of ungrounded signs captures the way in which signs such as those deployed by corporations such as Nike and Reebok have displaced the real commodities manufactured by those companies and are sought after for their signifiatory value alone. Although Baudrillard can be criticised for not reminding his readership of the social relations of production that appertain to the production of Nike and other branded goods, his silence about this is a perhaps unintentional reminder that the postmodern semiurgy has no place in its simulated reality for the actual conditions under which signs are produced. In postmodern capitalism the ideological occlusion of actual conditions and social relations of production is complete to a hitherto unimaginable degree.

The concept of the real as being historically constituted by signifiatory structures implies that, for Baudrillard, signification is the key area for political intervention. His notion of symbolic exchange can therefore be seen as an attempt to develop a form of political intervention in a society that is ultimately governed by codes of signification. However, although Baudrillard's notion of symbolic exchange is suggestive as a contestational political practice, it remains too ill defined and divorced from the key social loci of production for it to be the basis of an effective anti-capitalist politics. As Baudrillard moved away from any of his earlier Marxist affiliations towards an alternative leftism, his writing demonstrates a new animus towards what he presents as an undifferentiated and homogenous Marxism, a de-historicised Marxism which provides him with an easy critical target. Baudrillard's depiction of Marxism is itself a simulation informed by his theoretical model, taking no account of the diversity and continuing vitality of the Marxist tradition. The notion of 'symbolic exchange' could offer a valuable means of theorising the importance of the cultural, non-economic aspects of class antagonism if it was better defined as a practice in which prevailing values and the symbolic order of late capitalism are challenged. Baudrillard's suggestive but skeletal notion may well be fleshed out by being used to support case studies of actual political and industrial conflict in order to show how these conflicts have an important symbolic dimension that cannot be properly ignored or reduced to a reflection of an underlying 'economic reality' but is actually constitutive of social meaning.

Baudrillard's antipathy towards Marxism is most marked in *The Mirror of Production* where he argues that Marx and subsequent Marxist theorists have produced nothing other than a 'mirror' of capitalist production and exchange. Baudrillard's attack on what he regards as Marxism's conceptual conservatism,

reflects his estimation of its political conservatism. His 'solution' to what he regards as the inherent problems of Marxism is to continue to valorise signification as a privileged social category. This has resulted in Baudrillard adopting the materialist position, described in Chapter Two, that is very easily mistaken for an idealist one. The materialism that Baudrillard advocates is not based on any notion of a reality anterior to signification, but one which regards signifying structures as objective, material entities capable of determining social and cultural conditions. Baudrillard's materialism is one based on shifting the conceptual locus of materialism from 'primary', quotidian matter to what for him is the objective actuality of abstract structures, the structures that generate all forms of communications and social exchange. Baudrillard's genealogy of simulacra offers a suggestive account of the historical relations between political economy and signification when his peculiar version of materialism is borne in mind. The chapter demonstrates how Baudrillard's genealogy of simulacra can be applied to the conservation work and the growing heritage industry, using an example from East Lancashire. It argues that this industry is a third order simulacra, a simulation of working life in the waving and spinning mills of East Lancashire governed by the heritage industry's model of the history of the cotton industry in Lancashire. The actuality of the past does not intrude into this simulation, rather it displaces the way in which the people who worked in the mills coped with what was dangerous and unpleasant work. An entire history is displaced in favour of a simulation which is the mechanism by which a collective historical experience is converted into a commodified form.

Chapter Three of this thesis seeks to make Baudrillard's genealogy of simulacra more concrete by using Baudrillard's treatment of fashion in his earlier and mature works as a case study for a critical assessment of Baudrillard's concept

of simulation as a vast combinatory of signs that have no referents other than their generating models. The chapter looked at how Baudrillard developed a notion of fashion as a social 'driving force' for consumption, a conception of fashion in which new commodities displaced the old by virtue of their being 'in' fashion rather than 'out' of fashion. This notion of fashion as a linear process in which new fashion objects displaced existing objects is illustrated by Baudrillard's examples of the way in which demand for new cars was stimulated by constant changes to their appearance, so that one year's model was eclipsed by a new, redesigned model which became the 'fashionable' form of the car. Here Baudrillard presents the model as that which is the transcendent essence of the series, it is the pure form of each particular car in a production run, and that which is consumed when any particular car in a production run is purchased. However, this simple concept gave way in Baudrillard's second book *The Consumer Society* to a concept of fashion as a recycling of elements in which objects which were once 'out' of fashion are recycled as fashionable. This notion of recycling is the point of departure for Baudrillard's notion of fashion (and, by extension, all other sign systems) as a form of combinatory, a vast 'recycling' of signs which have no referents in the 'real' world but which are entirely derived from the models that inform the combinatories of simulacra.

Baudrillard's conception of fashion as a combinatory of simulated signs is a carceral order of signification, a combinatory which has displaced any sense of the world beyond signification and which has substituted itself as a hyperreal parody of what was taken as the real world. This account of signification within postmodern capitalism is open to attack on the grounds that it eradicates any sense of human agency, any sense that there is a praxis which can challenge the aleatory

reproduction of signs. This perfect combinatory is an aporia, a theoretical dead end. Baudrillard's notion of the sign as that which has eradicated its referent does not offer any possibility of constructing an alternative to the social conditions of postmodern capital. His attempts to be more radical than the Marxist tradition ultimately lead him to a position of pessimistic political quietism. However, as has been stated earlier, Baudrillard's own conception of simulation can be re-appropriated as an adjunct to a more robust radicalism. A radicalism in which the social meaning, the symbolic aspect, of political struggles are not relegated to a subsidiary role, but are accepted as a key form of ideological and therefore political struggle, the contestation of the given social meanings of late capitalism.

The point of departure for this reading of Baudrillard is his notion of a simulacrum or simulation, words which denote, for English readers, that which is a replica, a reproduction, a clone, a copy, a counterfeit, a duplicate, a facsimile, an image or an imitation.<sup>4</sup> All these terms imply a *process* in which an original is reproduced, and a *moment of production* in which an object's likeness is copied by another thing. Simulacra are therefore not simply a copy but that which has been *made into* a copy or reproduction of something else. In putting forward his theory of simulation, Baudrillard does not address the fact that all forms of simulation are the result of some form of production. This means that simulacra are dependent on both the technics of production and the given social relations of production for their existence, they are determined by the way in which they have been produced. Baudrillard's genealogy of simulacra acknowledges this in respect of the first and second orders of simulacra, but it presents the third order of simulacra as one in which production has been ousted by reproduction. This view of the modern or

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<sup>4</sup> The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1973 Edition) defines the word 'simulacrum' as "a material image" or a representation of some thing that is not the simulacrum itself.

postmodern semiurgy refuses to acknowledge that all production has both an economic and a signficatory dimension as Baudrillard himself demonstrated in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. All production is therefore the production of signs, the creation of objects that signify a social meaning. The French ultra-leftist author Jean Barrot describes this in the following terms in his essay *Ideology and the Wage System*:

**"Now, human activity does not produce only goods and relationships, but also representations. Man is not homo faber; the reduction of human life to the economy (since taken up by official Marxism) dates from the enthronement of capital. All activity is symbolic: it creates, at one and the same time, products and a vision of the world." [Ed. Home 1996, pg 24]**

The genesis of the simulation both as a product, an economic artefact, and as a sign is in the fact of its production. Baudrillard's genealogy of simulacra can be read as a genealogy of the signficatory aspects and the ontological effects of different modes of production since the Renaissance period. This reading of Baudrillard means that the genealogy of simulacra reads as a genealogy of the technics of production and the social relations of production.

The first order of simulacra is determined by a technology that has a limited capacity for serial production and by social relations that still placed tight restrictions on the circulation of signs between social classes. In this context, products would be far more restricted in number and be regarded, as Baudrillard states, as copies or counterfeits, each one being a particular counterfeit of a particular original. Baudrillard anticipates his analysis of the effects the technological and social restrictions on the production and circulation of signs in the early modern period when he analyses the different signficatory roles of a peasant's farmhouse table

and a 'Louis XV' table in *The System of Objects*:

**“Today a farmhouse table has cultural value, but just thirty years ago its sole value arose from the purpose it served. In the eighteenth century there was simply no relationship between a ‘Louis XV’ table and a peasant’s table: there was an unbridgeable gulf between the two types of object, just as there was between the two corresponding social classes. No single cultural system embraced them both.” [Baudrillard 1996, pgs 137 -138]**

The farmhouse table's meaning is its use value, it signifies only its functions as a table, while the decorations of a 'Louis XV' table 'counterfeit' and improve on the curves and planes of nature. Both tables signify their place in a hierarchical society but both do so as a result of acts of production, each gains its social meaning from being manufactured as a certain sort of object rather than by embodying a natural, God-given order of meaning. For Baudrillard, therefore, the key difference between the signifiatory order of the Mediaeval period and the early and later modern periods is the fact that sign values are produced rather than given. This means that, for Baudrillard, the Mediaeval social 'policing' of signs to restrict their circulation and meaning tends to give way in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to a technological determination of the meaning of signs. The aetiology of the modern sign is therefore to be located in production, whether that production is technically restricted and 'auratic' as in the first order of simulacra or whether it is dependent on serial production as in the second order of simulacra.

For Baudrillard, the second order of simulacra is, as we have seen, the apotheosis of political economy, the era when the forces of production displace the 'natural' referent by the sheer volume of serial production. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a massive rise in the productive capacity of Western Europe and

North America, this means that more objects were being produced and circulated as both products and signs. The signifiatory capacity of these products was, according to Baudrillard, much inferior to that of the products of the early modern period in that they did not signify a 'natural' referent but only the conditions of their own production. This order of simulacra is revolutionary in that it greatly extended the scope of productive, and therefore signifiatory, forces. Baudrillard, however, as we saw in Chapter Two, attempts to down play the importance of this fundamental revolution:

**We must ask ourselves whether production is not rather an intervention, a *particular phase, in the order of signs* - whether it is basically only one episode in the line of simulacra, that episode of producing an infinite series of potentially identical beings (object-signs) by means of technics."**

**[Baudrillard 1993, pg 55 - all italics the author's]**

Baudrillard is right in stating that this is one episode in the order of signs, a moment within a general economy of signification, but it is a moment which is only possible because of a vast expansion of the forces of production and a corresponding change in the social relations of production. It is the start not only of serial production but serial signification the production of identical signs that still convey social meanings in their very sameness. This order of signification has perhaps been best analysed by Walter Benjamin who clearly saw that this order of production greatly expanded the range and forms of signification. Benjamin also did not regard this expansion of productive capacity as something that went beyond the limits of production, and therefore production remained the privileged social and cultural category in his writings. Baudrillard, too, can be seen as identifying, although not celebrating, capitalist forms of mass commodity production as the moment in which signification was changed utterly, a change which is still affecting

us at the very beginnings of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In attempting to elevate signification over and above economic production, Baudrillard actually re-emphasises the importance of treating capitalist modes of production as both economic and signifiatory, as both the creation of commodities which function as signs, conveyors of social meaning. However, this should not distract us from how his relegation of the second order of simulacra to an intermediary role, a 'moment', between the key first and third orders of simulacra, leads to Baudrillard not grasping the impact of mass production and the new social relations of production and consumption of commodity/signs that it engendered. As Willis has demonstrated, the mass produced commodity is profoundly dependent on signification to define itself as a particular, individual commodity over and against its generic grouping; the mass produced commodity is dependent as a form on its capacity to signify itself as a commodity rather than as just another object among others. The era of mass production and its mode of commodity signification, as described by Willis, co-exists with the third order of simulacra's electronic reproduction of ungrounded signs but does so on the basis of mass production. The electronic media that allow the reproduction of signs without original referents are themselves mass produced commodities and circulate as such, despite Baudrillard attempts to substitute the domain of exchange relations, the circulation of signs, for the realm of material production which, as David Harvey has shown, informs the role and function of signification in postmodern capitalist society despite the increasingly phantasmagoric and uncanny nature of its semiurgy

Baudrillard argues that in the third order of simulacra, we enter a combinatory of signs that are ontologically divorced from any referent except their models. His vision of this signifiatory order is one in which all signs are reproduced from their

models, and each sign incessantly reproduces the nature of its generative model. Human beings become the terminals for a vast semiurgy, a combinatory of signs that cannot be challenged because they have no origins in discrete acts of production, but are instead the result of constant reproduction of simulation models. This state of affairs cannot be challenged if Baudrillard's own axiomatics are accepted, but if the third order of simulacra is read as an order based on production then it becomes possible to identify a point in the system which is vulnerable to political action. This point is the production of the signs that comprise the postmodern semiurgy, these signs are produced, manufactured by people using specific technologies and working within given social relations of production. These relations are maintained with a view to producing goods so that they can be exchanged in order to extract and accumulate profits from their consumption. What Baudrillard calls **"the law of capital"** [Baudrillard 1983, pg 101] has not given way to **"the structural law of value"** [Baudrillard 1983, pg 101], capital has merely found a new area to exploit. Images, whether on film, television or video, are commodities, they are as much commodities, products, as they are pure signifiers divorced from any prior referent. In this situation, capitalism is still vulnerable to organised labour and its implicit threat to the continuity of production. Although Baudrillard does not seem to realise it, capitalism is very much aware that organised labour is a threat to its ability to maximise profits no matter what the human cost, and its functionaries and apologists have spent many years in trying to undermine and curb the power of the labour movement in both Western Europe and North America. Perhaps the biggest reversal of Baudrillard's position comes with the realisation that it is this, not Baudrillard's abstract form of 'symbolic exchange', that most threatens capitalism as both an economic order and a signifiatory order. In this sense, the activities of ordinary trade unionists have a far

greater impact on the conjuncture that we are currently facing than Baudrillard's theorising.

Baudrillard's work has its flaws and it is hoped that these have been made apparent in the course of the preceding chapters and this conclusion. However, I would suggest in conclusion, that Baudrillard's work, if read in the light of the preceding paragraphs, offers a very useful insight into how capitalism welds base and superstructure together in the very processes of commodity production, exchange and consumption. It moves beyond, and invites Marxists and others, to use in moving away from the reductionist tenets of economism towards a realisation that the economic and signification can only be separated as a result of what Christopher Chase-Dunn dubs **"the needs of academic disciplines to maintain their boundaries"** [Chase-Dunn 1989, pg 113] or as an analytical convenience. Like the signifier and the signified, the economic and the signifiatory can only be separated in theory, in practice they are inseparable, the one giving form to another. If critically reading Jean Baudrillard instils one lesson, it is that there is no mode of production or reproduction that is not also a mode of signification, and that there is also no mode of signification that is not at the same time a mode of production or reproduction. Everything that is produced signifies and signification is the production of social meanings, the creation of a meaningful world from contingent matter. The flaws in Baudrillard's work must be addressed and it is important not to follow him towards replacing economic reductionism with a signifiatory reductionism. It is also important to realise that while Baudrillard cannot be assimilated into the Marxist critical tradition, it is an important stimulant and irritant, a body of work which is suggestive of a new way of conceiving the relation of signification and production as well as an insight into the ontological

impact of regimes of signification/production.. It remains to be seen if the implicit challenge within Baudrillard's work is taken up by Marxists and other critical theorists and whether the results prove to be a critique of postmodern capital that is not content with simply interpreting the world, but which also accepts Marx's injunction that **"the point is to *change it*" [Marx and Engels 1970, pg 123 - authors' italics].**

Beyond all the hype, Baudrillard's work sketches a conception of the world in which the economic and signifiatory are seamless is an important advance on attempts to conceive the world as an economic base and a socio-cultural substructure because it avoids the trap of economistic reductionism. If the trap of semiotic reductionism that ensnared Baudrillard can be avoided, this way of conceptualising the world should prove fruitful for those who are interested in the way that human beings produce their world and the conditions under which they produce that world. Baudrillard's work will remain important because it shows a way of thinking about signification without trying to make it secondary to economic practices, and although the faults in his work cannot be ignored, he deserves an audience in the coming century and beyond if only because of his attempt to think beyond an economistic essentialism and its detrimental grip on a tradition of radical thought.

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