

## Chapter 5

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# ‘Flee, but while fleeing, pick up a weapon’

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For all its problems, the playful breaking of codes and subversion of signs facilitated by much poststructuralist philosophy has had a powerful political effect. This has, however, been dissipated in more recent years by the incorporation of all poststructuralism into the heady hyperbole of the postmodern world view. And one consequence of this development is that postmodernism’s abandonment of any critical perspective is still conducted with the language, tactics, and style of the entire tradition considered in this book. The postmodern condition is like Dada without the war or surrealism without the revolution; postmodern philosophers are the sold-out situationists who wander without purpose, observing recuperations with a mild and dispassionate interest and enjoying the superficial glitter of a spectacular life. Naïvely offering an uncritical home to the notion of the spectacle, postmodern discourse is filled with chatterings about a concept it never imagines was once saturated with revolutionary intent.

The situationists had always been aware that the term ‘spectacle’ could easily be robbed of its critical force, recuperated as a descriptive concept and appropriated to serve the ends of spectacular society itself. ‘Without a doubt’, Debord had declared in *The Society of the Spectacle*, ‘the critical concept of the spectacle is susceptible of being turned into just another empty formula of sociologico-political rhetoric designed to explain and denounce everything in the abstract—so serving to buttress the spectacular system itself.’<sup>1</sup> This has indeed been the fate of the situationist critique of the spectacle which, twenty years after its initial development, now appears in a spectacular form of its own: a

context which precludes all critical appraisal and is content to describe and celebrate the ahistorical world of image, sign, and appearance.

In the midst of these affirmations, Debord spoke out again in 1988. His *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle* charted the recent development of the spectacle, reintroducing the possibility of its criticism to the postmodern world and asserting the continuing validity of situationist theory. Since the 1967 publication of *The Society of the Spectacle*, he wrote, and following the failure of the events of 1968, 'the spectacle has continued to gather strength'. Indeed, in 'all that has happened in the last twenty years', Debord argued, 'the most important change lies in the very continuity of the spectacle'.<sup>2</sup> It has 'learnt new defensive techniques, as powers under attack always do',<sup>3</sup> and is now stronger as a result of its success 'in raising a whole generation moulded to its laws'.<sup>4</sup> Only two explicit changes have occurred. The first, observed by Debord in his 1974 *Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of The Society of the Spectacle*, and reiterated in the *Comments*, is that a new and cynical honesty has entered the spectacle's representation of itself.

The society of the spectacle had begun everywhere in coercion, deceit, and blood, but it promised a happy path. It believed itself to be loved. Now it no longer says: 'What appears is good, what is good appears.' It simply says: 'It is so.' It admits frankly that it is no longer essentially reformable, though change be its very nature in order to transmute for the worst every particular thing. It has lost all its general illusions about itself.<sup>5</sup>

The spectacle no longer pretends its world is happy, unified, and capable of fulfilling every desire. 'Going from success to success, until 1968 modern society was convinced it was loved. It has since had to abandon these dreams; it prefers to be feared. It knows full well that "its innocent air has gone forever".'<sup>6</sup> And the end of this illusion is accompanied by the increasing homogeneity of the modern world. Debord's early distinction between the concentrated and diffuse forms of spectacular organisation is abandoned in favour of a single category: the integrated spectacle, to which cold war differences between bureaucratic totalitarianism and capitalist pluralism are increasingly insignificant. 'When the spectacle was concentrated, the greater part of surrounding society escaped it;

when diffuse, a small part; today, nothing. The spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality.<sup>77</sup> Without any sense of difference or opposition in the world, ‘this reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacle as something alien.’<sup>78</sup>

This would appear to mark a significant departure from the revolutionary optimism of *The Society of the Spectacle*. ‘Beyond a legacy of old books and old buildings’, writes Debord, ‘there remains nothing, in culture or in nature, which has not been transformed, and polluted, according to the means and interests of modern industry.’<sup>79</sup> Possessing ‘all the means necessary to falsify the whole of production and perception’, the spectacle ‘is the absolute master of memories just as it is the unfettered master of plans which will shape the most distant future’.<sup>10</sup> Its discourse ‘isolates all it shows from its context, its past, its intentions and its consequences. It is thus completely illogical. Since no one may contradict it, it has the right to contradict itself, to correct its own past.’<sup>11</sup> These Orwellian references—books and buildings being the only vestiges of the old world to encroach on the Winston of 1984 as he stumbles through falsified histories and manufactured revolution—bode ill for the revolutionary project. The essential opposition between the real and the spectacle would seem to be lost forever, drowned in a flow of images which ‘carries everything before it’ and leaves the spectator with neither the time nor the space to think, reflect, remember, or judge.

Convinced that the spectacle is no longer the hidden quality of modern capitalist society, Debord argued that the ‘vague feeling that there has been a rapid invasion which has forced people to lead their lives in an entirely different way is now widespread’. But the encroachment of spectacular relations is ‘experienced rather like some inexplicable change in the climate, or in some other natural equilibrium, a change faced with which ignorance knows only that it has nothing to say’. And what is more, he adds, ‘many see it as a civilising invasion, as something inevitable, and even want to collaborate’.<sup>12</sup> Expressions of ‘hypocritical regret’ for the passing of real life and superficial concerns with the technological and cultural developments which accelerate the cycles of reproduction and simulation are voiced in an ‘empty debate’ conducted ‘by the spectacle itself: everything is said about the extensive means at its disposal, to ensure that nothing is said about their extensive deployment’.<sup>13</sup>

Yet Debord still insists that an understanding of the consolidation of spectacular society is vital, for the sole reason that 'it is under such conditions that the next stage of social conflict will necessarily be played out'.<sup>14</sup> And, if we are to believe him, there is a great deal more to *Comments* than sits on the page. 'These comments are sure to be welcomed by fifty or sixty people', he observes at the outset 'a large number given the times in which we live and the gravity of the matters under discussion'.<sup>15</sup> But 'a good half of this interested elite will consist of people who devote themselves to maintaining the spectacular system of domination, and the other half of people who persist in doing quite the opposite.'<sup>16</sup> Encouraging the air of mystique already surrounding him ('An anti-spectacular notoriety has become something extremely rare'<sup>17</sup>), Debord insists that he cannot therefore speak freely in the text. 'Above all', he declares, 'I must take care not to give too much information to just anybody.'<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, silences, secrets, and cryptic moments will have to prevail, with some elements 'intentionally omitted; and the plan will have to remain rather unclear'.<sup>19</sup> It is evidently up to the twenty-five or thirty revolutionary readers to put the text together for themselves. And although *Comments* is as pessimistic as the age in which it arises, the picture it paints is by no means closed and hopeless.

If history should return to us after this eclipse, something which depends on factors still in play and thus on an outcome which no one can definitely exclude, these *Comments* may one day serve in the writing of a history of the spectacle; without any doubt the most important event to have occurred this century, and the one for which the fewest explanations have been ventured.<sup>20</sup>

It was clearly the conjunction of ubiquitous chatter about the spectacle with the complete absence of its serious critique which encouraged Debord to write still further. 'In other circumstances', he maintained, 'I think I could have considered myself altogether satisfied with my first work on this subject, and left others to consider future developments. But in the present situation, it seemed unlikely that anyone else would do it.'<sup>21</sup> But if no one has developed the situationist project, there has been no shortage of inversions, appropriations, and recuperations of the critique of spectacular society.

Baudrillard's trips through hyperreality take both situationist theory and poststructuralist discourse to an untenable extreme. Although Baudrillard's early nostalgia for some authentic relation between people and things left him vulnerable to the more strident rhetoric of Lyotard's *Economie Libidinale*, his more recent works have been beyond reproach from even the most insistent claims that reality, the human subject, and all senses of meaning, history, and purpose have forsaken the world. In Baudrillard's writing, we finally step into the postmodern with the same sense of giddiness and trepidation that accompanies the first step onto a boat. The deck shifts and sways beneath us; for a while there seems to be nothing to hold onto since everything is moving, and we look back with longing and fear as the land disappears. But after a while, we relax enough to turn our attention to the horizon, forgetting what dry land was ever like, so that the shore becomes as strange and mobile as the boat itself first seemed when we tread on it again. Baudrillard encourages us to believe that this is also the case for postmodernity. At first the postmodern world seems impossibly free and unbalanced, but soon we adapt so well to the perpetual motions that surround us that we can no longer remember how we ever lived on the solid foundations of the modern world. The only point at which the metaphor fails is that of the return to land. Both 'watchers and watched sail forth on a boundless ocean',<sup>22</sup> observes Debord: the postmodern voyager is doomed to be lost at sea.

In his writings of the late 1970s and 1980s, Baudrillard combined a sense of done-it-all-be fore world-weariness with a joyful enthusiasm for the disappearance of reality he discerns in every moment of contemporary life. The world of hyperreality and simulation is recorded and celebrated, and the possibility of making any sort of political intervention is happily dismissed. And this world is identical to the situationist spectacle: both are realms in which the real and the meaningful have slipped away amidst a confusion of signs, images, simulations, and appearances. But Baudrillard is content to take the spectacle at face value, removing all sense in which it can be considered as an inversion of the real. The spectacle must be believed: it has no mysteries, no secrets, and no underlying realities. Nothing is concealed, repressed, denied, or turned against itself; there is nothing to be represented, alienated, or separated, and mediations no longer stand between the subject and the world but circumscribe all meaning and reality. Baudrillard defined postmodernism as 'the characteristic of a universe where

there are no more definitions possible';<sup>23</sup> a world in which everything has 'been done' and all that remains is to play with the fragments. 'Playing with the pieces—that is postmodern'.<sup>24</sup> The pieces with which the postmodernist toys are the theories, ideas, and vocabularies in which the remnants of the lost modernist belief in the possibilities of progress, liberation, and meaning remain. Postmodernity is 'a game with the vestiges of what has been destroyed. This is why we are "post" — history has stopped, one is in a kind of post-history which is without meaning.'<sup>25</sup> In a doubly ironic reversal of the situationists' argument that the choice of life over survival allows for the free construction of situations 'on the ruins of the modern spectacle', Baudrillard characterises postmodernity as the attempt 'to reach a point where one can live with what is left. It is more a survival among the ruins than anything else.'<sup>26</sup>

One of Baudrillard's central concerns is with the media; the realm of simulation and reproduction in which every aspect of contemporary life is forced to appear. Observing the accelerated reproduction of the real, he argues that postmodernity is the point at which the real, the meaningful, and the authentic are finally and irrevocably confused with representations which become more real than reality itself. Ubiquitous images, simulations, and reproductions no longer distort or conceal the real; reality has slipped away into the free-floating chaos of the hyperreal. But the representations of the hyperreal world are not without effect. Media representation gives events and experiences a power which they no longer carry in themselves while at the same time perpetuating our faith that there must be something behind the representation—a real event, a true moment, an authentic expression, a meaningful experience—which has only later been transmuted into the spectacular existence from which nothing seems able to escape. Representations seduce us into believing in a reality which has long since disappeared. Images encourage the conviction that they are images of something, rather than the components which entirely constitute the world.

Baudrillard certainly turns conventional wisdom about both the media and their audiences upside-down. Conjuring a bleakly passive and homogeneous picture of 'the silent majorities', he nevertheless offers some sort of defence of the stupid apathy he has already imputed to 'the masses'. *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* insists that the media impose imperatives of reason,

communication, meaning, and reality on a mass which cares for nothing. 'They are given meaning: they want spectacle,'<sup>27</sup> he declares. In effect, they prefer pushpin to poetry or, in Baudrillard's terms, football to politics. The drama of the political cannot compete with the spectacle of football; continually cajoled into appreciating 'high culture' and discerning real meaning, the masses refuse point-blank to participate in the real world provided for them. For Baudrillard, this indicates that the media are actually overpowered by the mass, which absorbs and envelops them, accepting them with a proud and complete lack of interest or engagement. The masses are neither manipulated nor involved; their relation to the media is the entirely passive role of the object, and it is only in the ideology of the media itself that the insistent fears of manipulation and distortion are raised. 'Are the mass media on the side of power in the manipulation of the masses, or are they on the side of the masses in the liquidation of meaning?'<sup>28</sup> asks Baudrillard, overturning earlier radical convictions that 'resistance consists of reinterpreting messages according to the group's own codes and for its own ends. The masses, on the contrary, accept everything and redirect everything *en bloc* into the spectacular, without requiring any other code.'<sup>29</sup>

Far from signifying the extent of its alienation and domination, Baudrillard argues that the apathetic silence of the mass, which 'never participates', is its 'absolute weapon',<sup>30</sup> the means by which it continually verges on the destruction of all forms of power. Apathy is a problem only for those already in power or the revolutionaries who would seize it, both of whom are desperate to identify meaning, reality, and purpose in every aspect of social experience. 'Despite having been surveyed to death', however, the mass always refuses to answer: 'it says neither whether the truth is to the left or to the right, nor whether it prefers revolution or repression. It is without truth and without reason.'<sup>31</sup> This, Baudrillard argues, is the mass's answer to the overproduction of meaning which characterises the modern world and of which the Left is particularly guilty. 'Basically, what goes for commodities also goes for meaning,' he explains.

For a long time capital only had to produce goods; consumption ran by itself. Today it is necessary to produce consumers, to produce demand, and this production is infinitely more costly than that of the goods. [...] For a long

time it was enough for power to produce meaning (political, ideological, cultural, sexual), and the demand followed it; it absorbed supply and still surpassed it. Meaning was in short supply, and all the revolutionaries offered themselves to produce still more. Today, everything has changed: no longer is meaning in short supply, it is produced everywhere, in ever increasing quantities—it is demand which is weakening. And it is the *production of this demand for meaning* which has become crucial for the system.<sup>32</sup>

In the absence of this demand, 'power is nothing but an empty simulacrum',<sup>33</sup> vainly insisting that it bears a significance which the masses, on whom it supposedly imposes its manipulations and oppressions, refuse to acknowledge. And whereas the demand 'for objects and services can always be artificially produced', the 'desire for meaning, when it is in short supply, and the desire for reality, when it is weakening everywhere, cannot be made good.'<sup>34</sup> In an apparent vindication of situationist observations on the transformation of the real into a distant spectacle, Baudrillard argues that we are 'already at the point where political, social events no longer have sufficient autonomous energy to move us, and hence unfold like a silent film'.<sup>35</sup>

It is this effect of distance and disappearance which brings us to postmodern declarations of the end of history, a moment which, as Marx, Lukács, and Debord insisted, is inevitably presented as a permanent feature of capitalist social organisation. The loss of memory, purpose, and meaning which the end of history implies is signified for Baudrillard by the empty vacuity of the masses, who 'have no history themselves, no meaning, no consciousness, no desire'.<sup>36</sup> In the face of this inert and silent force, 'history cools, it slows down, events succeed each other and vanish in indifference'.<sup>37</sup>

History stops here, and we see in what way: not for want of people, nor of violence (there will always be more violence, but violence should not be confused with history), nor of events (there will always be more events, thanks to the media and information!), but by deceleration, indifference, and stupefaction. History can no longer outrun itself, it can no longer envisage its own finality, dream of its own end; it is buried in its own immediate effect, it implodes in the here and now.<sup>38</sup>



And this disappearance of real experiences, events, and historical meanings is not a matter for regret. It is only the 'beautiful souls' of the revolutionary Left who still believe in the real and deplore the fact that 'the media are putting an end to the real event'.<sup>39</sup> Lamenting the ubiquity of the spectacle, the silence of the majorities, and the lack of interest in the meaningful, the revolutionaries of the modern world merely perpetuate the nostalgia for truth, meaning, immediacy, and liberation which has characterised the critical tradition.

'We have always had a sad vision of the masses (alienated), a sad vision of the unconscious (repressed),' writes Baudrillard. 'Upon our entire philosophy lies the heavy weight of these sad correlations.'<sup>40</sup> And against this collective melancholia, the spectacle must be celebrated for its refusal of reality, its ability to make meaning appear and disappear in one move. The postmodern age is one in which we must finally accept that the 'will for spectacle and illusion' is stronger than the 'will for knowledge and power' to which it is opposed:

tenacious, deep in man's heart, it haunts nonetheless the process of events. There is, as it were, a desire for pure event, objective information, the most secret facts and thoughts, to be commuted into spectacle, to attain ecstasy in a scene instead of being produced as something really happening.<sup>41</sup>

The spectacle is not to be decried, but celebrated as the inevitable theatre of all existence. Events have no reality in themselves; there is no raw material of experience later subject to spectacularisation. Reality is something achieved by events and experiences only through their presentation in a scene. 'For something to be meaningful, there has to be a scene', he wrote, 'and for there to be a scene, there has to be an illusion, a minimum of illusion, of imaginary movement, of defiance to the real, which carries you off, seduces or revolts you.'<sup>42</sup> Meaning can only arise in the moment of its representation, when it assumes an appearance which immediately destroys its postulated reality. 'Without this properly esthetic dimension, mythical, ludic, there is not even a political scene where something can happen.'<sup>43</sup> Indeed, 'even Revolution can happen only if its spectacle is possible'.<sup>44</sup>

Such observations suggest that the real is only made possible in the moment of its reproduction, a position which Baudrillard reinforced with innumerable references to the copies and appearances ubiquitous in the postmodern world. Charting the historical movement of images from reflections to distortions and finally to equivalencies and perfections of the real, Baudrillard eventually identified a point at which it is no longer possible to speak of the image in terms of representation, but as a simulation which produces a reality more real than reality itself. Simulation 'threatens the difference between "true" and "false", between "real" and "imaginary"' with an unprecedented force. 'Since the simulator produces "true" symptoms, is he ill or not?'<sup>45</sup> he asks, challenging an increasingly untenable reality to assert itself in the midst of such confusion. Indeed, the image, he argues, has never merely threatened to distort or manipulate the real: rather, it has always been in danger of revealing the essential absence of that which it represents; it has always threatened to make the real disappear. Thus the iconoclasts' fear of images

arose precisely because they sensed this omnipotence of simulacra, this facility they have of effacing God from the consciousness of men, and the overwhelming, destructive truth which they suggest: that ultimately there has never been any God, that only the simulacra exists, indeed that God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum.<sup>46</sup>

Today it is representations of the real world and the meaningful message which threaten their disappearance amidst an ecstasy of communication, information technology, screens, and virtual realities. Television, 'the most beautiful prototypical object of this new era',<sup>47</sup> is the medium in which simulation really comes into its own, confusing reality and its representation by becoming a reality in itself. The case of the Louds, a family whose life was filmed and broadcast on American TV in the early 1970s, is used to illustrate the eradication of the difference between fiction and reality, epitomising 'the dissolution of TV into life, the dissolution of life into TV'.<sup>48</sup> As Baudrillard points out, the Louds lived 'as if TV wasn't there', a claim which actually translates as 'as if you, the viewer, were really there'. The Louds became a hyperreal family: not only was their representation their entire reality, but the family without the cameras disappeared—in this case, more literally than

the example requires, since the family broke up in the process. They really did sacrifice themselves to television: the cameras constructed and destroyed the family in one moment.

Examples such as this suggest that it is no longer sufficient to speak of television as spectacle, a medium which represents the real and provides for it a theatrical backdrop or mediation. The language of spectacle, theatre, and scene still conjure a sense of underlying reality, a world of meaning which is only later represented and brought into the realm of meaning. For Baudrillard, this perspective is merely a step on the road to the full obscenity of the postmodern world; the era in which the scene is truly and finally all that there is. In the moment at which images make the real disappear, we have made an irrevocable leap over a border of simulation which brooks no return. It is no longer possible to seek out the real under the manipulations and distortions of the image and the apparent: reality, and the entirety of social, political, and historical meanings dependent on it collapses in on itself in an implosive disappearance. Just as we 'can no longer discover music as it was before stereo (unless by an effect of supplementary simulation)', so 'we can no longer discover history as it was before information and the media'.

The original essence (of music, of the social...), the original concept (of the unconscious, of history...) have disappeared because we can never again isolate them from their model of perfection, which at the same time is their model of simulation, of their forced assumption in an excessive truth, which at once is their point of inertia and their point of no-return. We will never know what was the social, or what was music before their present exacerbation in useless perfection. We will never know what history was before its exacerbation in the technical perfection of information or its disappearance in the profusion of commentary—we will never know what anything was before its disappearance in the completion of its model.... Such is the era of simulation.<sup>49</sup>

And, in the absence of any referent of meaning and reality from which the spectacular world of scenes and appearances might be distinguished, the notions of spectacle and scene finally drop into obsolescence. Winding his way through the convictions of the avant-garde, situationist theory, the events of 1968 and

poststructuralist philosophy, Baudrillard tells the story of this achievement.

In the beginning was the secret, and this was the rule of the game of appearance. Then there was the repressed, and this was the rule of the game of depth. Finally comes the obscene, and this was the rule of the game of a world without appearance or depth—a transparent universe.<sup>50</sup>

'So the consumer society was lived under the sign of alienation, as society of the spectacle; but still the spectacle is only spectacle, it is never obscene.' It is only necessary to speak of the obscene 'when there is no longer a scene, when everything becomes inexorably transparent', when it is finally possible to say, 'We are no longer in the drama of alienation, we are in the ecstasy of communication'.<sup>51</sup>

Baudrillard presents the passage from the real to the scene and finally to the obscene as a consequence of power's long history of distorting reality, concealing the truth, and dominating the masses. In effect, he portrays a world in which this strategy has been destroyed by its own success. Continual denials of meaningful participation and subjective expression have finally eradicated the very possibility of their assertion. We are in a position in which the slaves, to return to Hegelian categories which Baudrillard has supposedly left far behind, completely undermine the power of their masters by refusing to recognise their dominion. So efficient has the exercise of power over meaning and subjectivity become, that these referents are no longer merely concealed and repressed, but actually eradicated. The masses no longer recognise or respond to the power relations which need them to participate as oppressed and manipulated victims. The master has destroyed the slaves and, with them, his own power. There is no longer any active force to be dominated or repressed, and power too is revealed as a chimerical simulation of itself: a vacuous, almost mystical category which only ever existed by virtue of its own ability to construct an effective and convincing image of power.

The only weapon of power, its only strategy against this defection, is to reinject realness and referentiality everywhere, in order to convince us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production.<sup>52</sup>

The image which continually threatens to reveal the vacuity of the real must be invested with this strategy; used as a means to reinforce reality where it really eradicates it. And so, rather paradoxically, Baudrillard argues that the image now becomes the guardian of the real. This is a strategy epitomised by Disneyland, an imaginary America, which conveniently convinces us of the reality of everything outside it.

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of America, which *is* Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral). Disneyland is presented as an imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation.<sup>53</sup>

The imaginary worlds which threaten the real are therefore appropriated for its protection. But this too is a fictional scenario, in which it is merely the image of the real which is safeguarded while the real entirely evaporates. Just as subjectivity has been emptied from the masses, which finally stand revealed as the object they always were, so reality is emptied from the image, which now represents nothing but its own, and simulated, reality.

This circularity, in which the image is engaged in an eternal return upon itself, marks not only the ends of reality, meaning and history, but also signifies the impossibility of critical thought and all political engagement. Contradiction and negation are finally redundant in a world in which it is possible neither to distinguish between the real and the apparent, the true and the false, nor, to privilege one term over another.

Simulation, the generalised passage to the code and the signvalue, was at first described in critical terms, in the light (or shadow) of a problematic of alienation. It was still the society of the spectacle, and its denunciation, which was the focal point of the semiological, psychoanalytical, and sociological arguments. Subversion was still sought in the transgression of the categories of political economy: use-value, exchange-value, equivalence.<sup>54</sup>

All such possibilities of subversion are now removed if struggles for meaning and power persist only in simulated versions of themselves.

And yet Baudrillard, declaring the impossibility of opposition and critique, still insists on some sense of contradiction in his own work. His entire emphasis on the overwhelming matrixes of images, information, and communication systems in modern society is itself conducted in an effort to dispense with the metaphors of production which have characterised both Marxist and many poststructuralist philosophies. To production, a framework in which the world is always produced in some sense by some privileged and 'other' force—the subject, relations of power, or desire—Baudrillard counterposes seduction, a term which replaces all sense of fundamental relations at work in the world with strategies of disappearance and concealment engaged in a meaningless play. Production brings things into view, makes them real, meaningful, and purposeful; seduction comes into play at the moment when meanings and events are overproduced in the midst of accelerating circuits of image, message, and representation to the point at which they disappear. Seduced by the ubiquity of images to believe that the real still exists, the postmodern consciousness is then abandoned in a world from which any sense of reality has evaporated.

With the establishment of seduction as the new principle of the postmodern world, Baudrillard inverts the entire strategy of the old, modern, revolutionary project. In place of desires for truth and real experience, the "liberation" of meaning and the destruction of appearances',<sup>55</sup> he promotes secrecy and mediation, artifice and objectification, arguing that the attempt to unveil the world's secrets and achieve some sense of immediate engagement with the world is misplaced and misguided. Positioning itself on the side of subjectivity, real events, meanings, and immediacy against commodified representations, images and experiences, the revolutionary tradition to which the situationists belonged has been fighting not merely a losing battle, but one which was always already lost. Struggles against recuperation were always doomed, argues Baudrillard: moments of authenticity have never preceded their recuperation, and the desire for their realisation has always been naïve. For such senses of acute reality are merely the seductive fictions which have deceived us into working and waiting for their fulfilment for more than a century. Still absorbed in the project to

produce the world—to make it do, make, and mean more—and continuing to participate in linear and ideological conceptions of time and history which impute a purpose, direction, and sense of progress to every event, the revolutionary critique has merely contributed to the overproduction of meaning and reality which has finally made them disappear. The masses no longer pretend to be interested: objectified they have been, and objects they become. Things no longer presume to bear some use-value or purpose: commodified out of meaningful existence, they merely exist as dead weights, happily proclaiming their inert futility. In the face of simultaneous and simulating representations, ideas, events, and experiences can no longer be really felt, and even the most intimate emotions and the most radical gestures are irretrievably confused with their spectacular inversions. The great events of the day are subjected to endless media exposure,

but still we can't really imagine them. All of that, for us, is simply obscene, since images in the media are made to be seen but not really looked at, hallucinated in silhouette, absorbed—like sex absorbs the voyeur: from a distance. Neither spectators, nor actors—we are voyeurs without illusion.<sup>56</sup>

Such are the pessimistic reflections which mark Baudrillard's later work, leading him to commend the honesty of the meaningless, the superficial, the secret, and the artificial in a world saturated with impossible searches for truth, revelation, depth, and authenticity. At least the surfaces and appearances of the world do not pretend to be more than themselves, and it is in them that we should place our faith.

Contrary to our residual faiths in an irreversible progress towards resolution and realisation, history has turned back on itself in a reversal which calls for a new and inverted strategy: 'For critical theory one must therefore substitute a fatal theory, to bring this objective irony of the world to completion.'<sup>57</sup> Like Lyotard, therefore, Baudrillard insists that the 'only radical and modern answer' to the ubiquity of the commodified image lies in 'the deepening of negative conditions',<sup>58</sup> the attempt to 'potentiate what is new, original, and unexpected in the commodity—for example, its formal indifference to utility and value, the preeminence given to circulation'.<sup>59</sup> Here ends the attempt to defend the subject against the encroachment of commodity relations: alienation and the entire

world of appearances theorised by the situationists is to be celebrated and encouraged; pushed beyond itself and accelerated until it subverts and exposes itself. Subversion and dissent lie not in the subject but its reified form: the object which refuses to bear meaning, the image which represents nothing, the sign which fails to signify, the commodified and silenced mass which refuses to participate.

This marks the complete inversion of situationist theory, with which Baudrillard remains engaged throughout his work. Convinced that all desires for participation in created situations have been replaced by the drive for spectacle, Baudrillard pours scorn on the situationist dream. 'That things exhaust themselves in their spectacle—in a magic and artificial fetishism—is the distortion that serious minds will always oppose, in their utopian expurgation of the world in order to deliver it exact, intact, and authentic for the day of the Last Judgement.'<sup>60</sup> Against situationist claims that struggles against alienation would reveal a new world of immediacy and participation, Baudrillard insists that the boredom of contemporary life, far from being counterrevolutionary, is not at all a problem. Rather, 'the essential point is the increase of boredom; increase is salvation and ecstasy'.

How could we suppose that people were going to disavow their daily life and look for an alternative to it? On the contrary, they'll make a destiny out of it: intensify it while seeming to do the opposite, plunge into it to the point of ecstasy, seal the monotony of it with an even greater monotony.<sup>61</sup>

And against both the 'serious minds' and the 'beautiful souls' of the situationist tradition, Baudrillard implores us to throw in our lot with the winning side, abandoning all claims for the subject and accepting that the object has a power and irreducibility which subjectivity can never attain:

the object does not believe in its own desire; the object does not live off the illusion of its own desire; the object has no desire. It does not believe that anything belongs to it as property, and it entertains no fantasies of reappropriation or autonomy.<sup>62</sup>



Why swim against the tide of commodification any longer, Baudrillard seems to be asking. 'Why privilege the position of the subject, why support this fiction of a will, a conscience, even of an unconscious for the subject?'<sup>63</sup> Years of defence and definition of the subject have called it into question to such an extent that it has become quite untenable. It is no longer possible to declare, with Vaneigem, that the subject is the unproblematic locus of desire, individuality, poetic experience, and creativity. 'We arrive then at this paradox, at this conjuncture where the position of the subject has become untenable, and where the only possible position is that of the object. The only strategy possible is that of the object.'<sup>64</sup>

In much of this work, Baudrillard assumes the role of the lone seer, desperately warning us of the hopelessness of our attempts to hang on to some conception of real life and meaningful experience. And because of this, there is a sense in which he continues the task of the critical theorist and still conveys some drive for opposition and negation. For although the substance of his work is quite alien to any critical tradition, Baudrillard admits his debt and attachment to situationist theory. 'I was very, very attracted by Situationism,' he declares. 'And even if today Situationism is past, there remains a kind of radicality to which I have always been faithful. There is still a kind of obsession, a kind of counterculture, which is still there. Something that has really stayed with me.'<sup>65</sup>

And while he scorns and inverts the situationist dream, Baudrillard continues, like generations of romantics and revolutionaries before him, to counterpose the world's self-image to some other, more real reality. His battle lines are drawn between all pretenders to truth, subjectivity, meaning, and the whole gamut of desiring and impassioned struggles for real experience on the one hand, and all blatant declarations of simulation, commodification, seduction, and artifice on the other. The world has in some sense shifted to this last camp, and it is here, in the surfaces and secrets of mediation, that the truly irrecuperable gestures are finally to be found. 'The present system of dissuasion and simulation succeeds in neutralizing all finalities, all referentials, all meanings, but it fails to neutralize appearances. It forcefully controls all the procedures for the production of meaning. It does not control the seduction of appearances. No interpretation can explain it, no system can abolish it. It is our last chance.'<sup>66</sup> Baudrillard insists that the struggle of the subject against the world of objects has finally been reversed purely as a consequence of its own history, by a simple twist of fate.

Our all-too-beautiful strategies of history, knowledge, and power are erasing themselves. It is not because they have failed (they have, perhaps, succeeded too well) but because in their progression they reached a dead point where their energy was inverted and they devoured themselves, giving way to a pure and empty, or crazy and ecstatic, form.<sup>67</sup>

This sense of there being nowhere left to go and nothing new to say is a message which even the most optimistic readings of postmodernism are hard-pressed to avoid. For the postmodern age into which Baudrillard's work ushers us is above all characterised by a reworking of previous styles, vocabularies, ideas, and experiences; a representation of earlier moments from which all critical force and political momentum are excluded. Dada's cut-ups reappear in the fragmented texts of postmodern discourse, and surrealism's collages resurface on advertisement hoardings. Works of art more real than reality itself practise a struggle for the hyperreality of the over-commodified object and the disappearance of all aesthetic meaning, and many of those art forms characterised as postmodern appear as vacuous realisations of the situationist project. Boundaries between art and everyday life are eradicated, and distinctions between disciplines and styles are challenged with a new blossoming of discursive forms. Cultural references are glued, sometimes literally, onto the façades of factories and offices redundant even before their completion, and a curiously glamorous, classical, and superficial aesthetic, which is precisely that of the commodity, is painted over every remnant of the modern world. In gallery, street, and shop, the integrated environment has come into its own, and new technological developments continue to clear the way for holograms, laser lighting, and virtual reality to produce ever-more ecstatic forms of communication.

That situationist dreams of a freely constructed environment should be so subtly displaced comes as no surprise. 'The only thing that can be expressed in the mode of the spectacle is the emptiness of everyday life,' wrote Vaneigem. 'And indeed, what better commodity than an aesthetic of emptiness?'<sup>68</sup> Neither was it difficult to anticipate the re-emergence of the critical theory of the spectacle in Baudrillard's aimless excursions through a moment of history mistaken for its final realisation. Baudrillard's work is sophisticated and provocative: persuasive in the extreme, it is

difficult to resist his exhortations and virtually impossible to contest them. But even at their best, his ideas are always and quite literally pointless. Devoid of both direction and origin, his most astute observations are mere descriptions made from some indeterminate realm too shifting and diffuse to constitute a critical perspective. As such, his texts are a perfect example of Debord calls ‘lateral critique’, a writing

which perceives many things with considerable candour and accuracy, but places itself to one side. Not because it affects some sort of impartiality, for on the contrary it must seem to find much fault, yet without ever apparently feeling the need to reveal its *cause*, to state, even implicitly, where it is coming from and where it wants to go.<sup>69</sup>

Likening this kind of groundless criticism to ‘those facsimiles of famous weapons, which only lack the firing-pin’,<sup>70</sup> Debord awakens the notion of recuperation from the slumber induced by postmodern denials of its existence. Spectacular discourse ‘isolates all it shows from its context, its past, its intentions and its consequences’,<sup>71</sup> he writes. And from the pages of *Comments*, Baudrillard’s work appears as a perfected and spectacular description of the spectacle, confirming its implicit insistence that history has ended, political action is futile, and subjective experience is always already commodified and recuperated.

*Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* observes many of the characteristics of the modern world described by Baudrillard. With and after situationist theory, Debord recognises the apparent impossibility of strategies of opposition, contradiction, or transgression with which the ‘fragile meta-stability’,<sup>72</sup> as Baudrillard describes American capitalist society, or Debord’s conception of the spectacle as a state of ‘*fragile perfection*’<sup>73</sup> might be contested. For Debord, ours is a society which ‘must no longer be exposed to attacks, being fragile; and indeed is no longer open to attack, being perfect as no other society before it’.<sup>74</sup> Baudrillard observes the ‘evaporation of any real alternative’, describing an ‘uncontested and uncon testable’ society to which there is ‘no real opposition any more’,<sup>75</sup> and Debord describes the spectacle’s ability to dispense ‘with that disturbing conception, which was dominant for over two hundred years, in which a society was open to criticism or transformation, reform or

revolution. Not thanks to any new arguments, but simply because all argument has become useless.<sup>76</sup>

But the similarities of their contemporary positions are underwritten and undermined by radical political differences. Debord's writing is purposeful and deliberate: he remains bitterly unhappy that simulations and appearances are emptying the world of meaning and reality and, still waiting for history to return to us, he decries the spectacular domination of the world as surely as in his earlier texts. For Baudrillard, however, it is not merely the case that we seem to have forsaken historical reality for a matrix of signs and simulations: this passage is complete, and the suggestion that history is at an end is 'by no means a despairing hypothesis, unless we regard simulation as a higher form of alienation—which I certainly do not'.<sup>77</sup>

From Baudrillard's perspective, Debord's laments are reactionary and nostalgic, still contained by struggles for production and the uncovering of more meaning, historical reality, and subjective experience. And to Debord, Baudrillard's work is based on a fundamental error, signalled, perhaps, by his specialised obsession with the media. Mistaking the appearances, simulations, and signs of reality for reality itself, Baudrillard has happily accepted the spectacle's own account of itself. As Debord had written in *The Society of the Spectacle*: 'Understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance.'<sup>78</sup> And indeed, for Baudrillard, modern society is entirely circumscribed by its superficial characteristics. If we are led to believe that history has ended then it must be so; if dissent is always recuperated it must inevitably be lost; if events and experiences seem confused amidst a welter of spectacles and reproductions, they must truly have disappeared.

Like Baudrillard, Debord argues that 'the tendency to replace the real with the artificial is ubiquitous.'

In this regard, it is fortuitous that traffic pollution has necessitated the replacement of the Marly Horses in place de la Concorde, or the Roman statues in the doorway of Saint-Trophime in Arles, by plastic replicas. Everything will become more beautiful than before, for the tourists' cameras.<sup>79</sup>

The growth of theme parks and the entire heritage industry substantiates Debord's claims that the false 'reinforces itself by knowingly eliminating any possible reference to the authentic', while the genuine 'is reconstructed as quickly as possible, to resemble the false'.<sup>80</sup> For Debord, this remains a matter for angry regret. The endless reproductions and representations of the spectacular world inspire no celebration, and privilege is still accorded to that which is spectacularised. There is still, in other words, a theatre into which real meanings and events are displaced and transported; a spectacle which remains an inversion of the real.

For Baudrillard, however, priority must now be given to appearance and artifice. And a nostalgic faith in the moment of liberation is not the only consequence of such pleas for the authentic. Taking nuclear war as his example, Baudrillard points out, as the situationists had also done, that the spectacle of war is more effective a display of power than its reality. And for Baudrillard, this merely proves that the appearance is infinitely preferable to the reality: 'this spectacle that the moralists disapprove of', he argues, 'is possibly the lesser evil. For God knows where unleashed meaning would lead to when it refuses to produce itself as appearance.'<sup>81</sup> This may be true of the nuclear spectacle, and coal mines converted for tourist appreciation are certainly safer than their earlier 'real' incarnations. But what of other realities and meanings? What of the love and poetry invoked by the situationists? Are mediations and simulations of the desires of Vaneigem's radical subject really preferable to struggles for their reality? Baudrillard clearly feels that they are. 'When nothing moves you any more', he writes, 'you must find a sign to stand in for passion.'

I have played at passion, I have played at tenderness.... Sometimes it even seems to me that I have never done anything but provide the semblance of ideas. But that is the one and only way out we have to take in a speculative world with no way out: to come up with the most successful signs of an idea. Or in an emotional world with no way out: to come up with the most successful signs of a passion.<sup>82</sup>

It is from a strangely misogynistic sexual experience and metaphor that Baudrillard derives much of his work on the seductive power of objects and artifice. The sexual object is said to be 'powerful in its absence of desire' just as the masses are 'powerful in their silence'.<sup>83</sup>

The extent of the differences between Baudrillard's endorsements of superficiality and the situationist perspective from which Debord still writes revolves around the question of whether the illusions encouraged by the spectacle have now become more real than the reality they once concealed, or whether, with Debord, they remain illusions to be unmasked. Does the modern world remain vulnerable to negation, merely appearing to make realities and meanings disappear by a sleight of hand to which commentators like Baudrillard fall happy victim, or have the spectacle's earlier denials of history really blossomed into a true end of history, bringing the absolute impossibility of meaningful change or social transformation? For Debord, the introduction of this last position into contemporary, and apparently radical, discourse, is a 'welcome break' for power, which is now guaranteed success 'in all its undertakings, or at least the rumour of success'.<sup>84</sup> The end of history is the eradication of any meaningful context in which the fragments of the contemporary world can be measured and assessed. 'History's domain was the memorable, the totality of events whose consequences would be lastingly apparent';<sup>85</sup> without historical knowledge, the possibility of judgement and evaluation is removed. 'When the spectacle stops talking about something for three days, it is as if it did not exist For it has then gone on to talk about something else, and it is that which henceforth exists.'<sup>86</sup>

The precious advantage which the spectacle has acquired through the *outlawing* of history, from having driven the recent past into hiding, and from having made everyone forget the spirit of history within society, is above all the ability to cover its own tracks—to conceal the very progress of its recent world conquest. Its power already seems familiar, as if it had always been there. All usurpers have shared this aim: to make us forget that *they have only just arrived*.<sup>87</sup>

The end of history abandons us in an eternal present, in which events 'retreat into a remote and fabulous realm of unverifiable stories, uncheckable statistics, unlikely explanations and untenable reasoning'.<sup>88</sup> Devoid of meaning and purpose, events and experiences have neither past nor future, and significance is attributed 'only to what is immediate, and to what will be immediate immediately afterwards, always replacing another, identical, immediacy' in a media-generated 'eternity of noisy insignificance'.<sup>89</sup> The spectacle is

sustained by the ‘manufacture of a present where fashion itself, from clothes to music, has come to a halt, which wants to forget the past and no longer seems to believe in a future’; an eternity of meaninglessness ‘achieved by the ceaseless circularity of information, always returning to the same short list of trivialities, passionately proclaimed as major discoveries’.<sup>90</sup>

The end of history facilitates the dissemination of an unverifiable discourse; a series of unanswerable lies and mystifications.

The spectacle proves its arguments simply by going round in circles: by coming back to the start, by repetition, by constant reaffirmation in the only space left where anything can be publicly affirmed, and believed, precisely because that is the only thing to which everyone is witness.<sup>91</sup>

This circularity of media, messages, and audience means that the spectacle skilfully ‘organises ignorance of what is about to happen and, immediately afterwards, the forgetting of whatever has nonetheless been understood’.<sup>92</sup> And our entire society, writes Debord, is ‘built on secrecy’,

from the ‘front’ organisations which draw an impenetrable screen over the concentrated wealth of their members, to the ‘official secrets’ which allow the State a vast field of operation free from any legal constraint; from the often frightening secrets of shoddy production hidden by advertising, to the projections of an extrapolated future, in which domination alone reads off the unlikely progress of things whose existence it denies, calculating the responses it will mysteriously make.<sup>93</sup>

On one level, this secrecy is manifest in quite obvious areas: Debord points to areas of increasing inaccessibility—the quasi-military establishments and anonymous government departments which pepper the cities and countryside, and the prevalence of ‘people trained to act in secret’ —to suggest that ‘under the rule of the integrated spectacle, we live and die at the confluence of innumerable mysteries’.<sup>94</sup> But Debord’s secrecy is a more profound characteristic of spectacular organisation; one which, unlike Baudrillard’s observations on the subject, continues to suggest that there are still things which are hidden. Insisting that secrecy is the exception to a free society of abundant information, the spectacle makes a virtue out

of its concealed knowledges. 'Everyone accepts that there are inevitably little areas of secrecy reserved for specialists; as regards things in general, many believe they are *in on the secret*,' writes Debord. But this secrecy runs deeper still; it 'dominates this world, and first and foremost as the secret of domination',<sup>95</sup> since it is always the very existence of any system of domination which is perpetually denied.

Debord also suggests that our obsession with the media, surely epitomised by Baudrillard's work, is itself a distraction which precludes any critical engagement with the spectacle itself.

Rather than talk of the spectacle, people often prefer to use the term 'media'. And by this they mean to describe a mere instrument, a kind of public service which with impartial 'professionalism' would facilitate the new wealth of mass communication through mass media.<sup>96</sup>

The spectacle complains of its own abuses, criticises its spectators for being too stupid to see through its own propaganda, and organises a wonderful display of internal debate so that the excesses of particular spectacles conceal the ubiquity of spectacular life itself. The spectacle becomes 'merely the excesses of the media, whose nature, unquestionably good since it facilitates communication, is sometimes driven to extremes'.<sup>97</sup> But the spectacle is more than this: it is a world in which appearances are organised and lived experience eradicated. And likewise the media is much less: it is merely the realm in which orders are communicated 'with perfect harmony', for 'those who give them are also those who tell us what to think of them'.<sup>98</sup>

The apathy and stupidity of spectators is not the consequence of some ineluctable drive towards spectacle and reification, as Baudrillard would have us believe. It is the spectacle which stupefies and commodifies, forcing us to live in its truly 'global village', full of the 'conformism, isolation, petty surveillance, boredom and repetitive malicious gossip about the same families' which characterise every other sort of village.<sup>99</sup> When respect is demanded for the most banal of celebrities and stars, 'when they are held to be rich, important, prestigious, to be *authority itself*', it is little wonder that 'the spectators tend to want to be just as illogical as the spectacle'.<sup>100</sup> And meanwhile, 'news of what is genuinely important, or what is actually changing, comes rarely, and then in fits and starts. It always concerns this world's apparent condemnation of its own existence, the stages in



its programmed self-destruction.<sup>101</sup> Ours is a world in which ‘*everything which can be done, must be done*’,<sup>102</sup> a society which has lost its reason<sup>103</sup> at the very moment in which thoughtful and strategic responses to enormous questions of environmental disaster, for example, are urgently required.

It is indeed unfortunate that human society should encounter such burning problems [writes Debord] just when it has become materially impossible to make heard the least objection to the language of the commodity; just when power...*believes that it no longer needs to think*, and indeed can no longer think.<sup>104</sup>

Debord paints a scenario in which everyone is busily watching everyone else in a spiralling web of purposeless surveillance which ‘spies on itself, and plots against itself’.<sup>105</sup> And so there is ‘a contradiction between the mass of information collected on a growing number of individuals, and the time and intelligence available to analyse it’,<sup>106</sup> until it becomes possible to ‘speak of domination’s falling rate of profit, as it spreads to almost the whole of social space and consequently increases both its personnel and its means’.<sup>107</sup> A host of ‘professional conspirators are spying on each other without really knowing why.... Who is observing whom? On whose behalf, apparently? And actually? The real influences remain hidden, and the ultimate aims can barely be suspected and almost never understood.’<sup>108</sup> And the final contradiction of the all-pervasive surveillance of contemporary society is that it is ‘spying on, infiltrating and pressurising *an absent entity*: that which is supposed to be trying to subvert the social order’.<sup>109</sup> This subversive force does not exist: ‘Wherever the spectacle has its dominion the only organised forces are those which want the spectacle’,<sup>110</sup> and both revolutionary organisations and their theoretical developments appear to have exhausted themselves. ‘Certainly conditions have never been so seriously revolutionary,’ argues Debord, but, ironically, ‘it is only governments who think so. Negation has been so thoroughly deprived of its thought that it was dispersed long ago. Because of this it remains only a vague, yet highly disturbing threat.’<sup>111</sup> Having taken the infiltration and provocation of negative forces to a limit at which it is no longer possible to distinguish the real elements of subversion from their simulated versions, the spectacle is now forced into the construction of its own enemies, developing ‘an interest in organising poles of negation itself’.<sup>112</sup> But these manipulations, epitomised by the

fabricated terrorist outrages in Italy, are no longer confined to such brutal manifestations. Now it is theoretical and ideological opposition which needs to be constructed and manipulated so that the reality of its disappearance is concealed.

Here Debord seems remarkably close to Baudrillard. Negation is absent; it has disappeared under the weight of discourses still desperately insisting on its existence. And Debord's penultimate observations in *Comments* reinforce this pessimism. The spectacle, he writes, has developed beyond the consciousness of those operating within it: spectacular society has still to become conscious of its own vacuity and meaninglessness.

Not only are the subjected led to believe that to all intents and purposes they are still living in a world which in fact has been eliminated, but the rulers themselves sometimes suffer from the absurd belief that in some respects they do too.... This backwardness will not last long. Those who have achieved so much so easily must necessarily go further.<sup>113</sup>

But although Baudrillard's hyperreality seems to be waiting just around Debord's last corner as an ineluctable horizon at which the spectacle will one day meet its own image, there is still a sense in which Debord refuses to follow Baudrillard to the point at which the social world spirals off in to a free-floating chaos of meaningless flux. There remains something confused by modern society; there are still realities to be secreted and revealed, gestures to be recuperated and recuperations to be subverted. The spectacle's obsession with surveillance may entrap itself in absurd webs of internal observation and the fabricated threat of subversion, but it still operates its fictional deterrence in anticipation of an outbreak of real dissent. The integrated spectacle has 'driven its critique into genuine clandestinity, not because it is in hiding but *because it is hidden* by the ponderous stage-management of diversionary thought', and 'provocation, infiltration, and various forms of elimination of authentic critique in favour of a false one...have been created for this purpose'.<sup>114</sup> And although memories of the past and hopes for the future have left the agenda of the integrated spectacle, the consequence of a perpetual present is that 'once the running of a State involves a permanent and massive shortage of historical knowledge, that State can no longer be led strategically'.<sup>115</sup> If the forces of negation are devoid of purpose, meaning, and reality, so too are those which support the spectacle. We

return to the point at which ‘order reigns and does not govern’<sup>116</sup> identified by Vaneigem; the moment at which all sense of strategy and direction is removed from spectacular organisation which endlessly and aimlessly reproduces itself.

For Baudrillard, this is all true, and there is nothing to be done about it. It is a comforting message, and postmodernism does of course relieve us of many exhausting burdens—not least the imperatives to seek the truth, to make the best, to create the new, and change the world—and frees us to enjoy the pleasures of the texts, the games among the vestiges. Without purpose and meaning, anything can be said and done. The cities look pretty, shopping is fun, commodities are friendly, and all sorts of dreams come true with barely a touch of a button. Superficially, everything is fine. And it is indeed tempting to assert the impossibility and undesirability of critical thought in such an apparently seamless world. In the face of the ubiquity of image and representation, unprecedented sophistications of the contemporary world, and the failure of a century of revolutionary critique, it is also far easier to swim with the tide and declare the end of all negation and dissent. Baudrillard’s story fits like a glove; rather ironically, it is a faithful representation of the self-image promoted by capitalist social organisation.

And yet the seductive ease of such a world view is no reason to accept it. It has certainly become extremely difficult to introduce contradiction and negation into a discourse which has written out the possibility of a critical perspective or a world in which even the most radical gesture is immediately disarmed. But it is quite possible to assert that appearances are not, in fact, everything; that the spectacle has not spiralled off into an uncontrollable space; that the workings of contemporary society are not arcane; the masses continue to love, fight, work, and riot; and that history, contrary to decades of propaganda, is not dead, but merely sleeping. Nowhere, it is true, is there a critical project able to wield such observations as weapons of negation. But *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* at least proves that it is possible to say all that Baudrillard has said without positioning oneself in the postmodern, and while there is no longer a flurry of revolutionary activity in which such a work can be received, it is also true that the age in which we live is far from the blind circularity of passive affirmation invoked by postmodern theory.

It fortunately remains the case that the networks of subversion which continue to arise in even the most postmodern pockets of the postmodern world are too numerous to detail here. And even in the

midst of the 'aesthetic of emptiness' prevailing in the artistic milieu, recognition of the immense difficulties facing any critical engagement with an increasingly absorbent system of social relations has not led all cultural production to the aestheticisation of a spectacular environment. The radical trajectory begun by Dada has not accepted the petrifying conclusions of postmodern theory, and the awareness that even the most radical of gestures can be disarmed continues to encourage a search for irrecuperable forms of expression and communication. That a great deal of cultural agitation is hidden from the public gaze is sometimes indicative of its tactics rather than its absence. Radical artists have learnt from the 'horizontal' and anti-hierarchical networking characteristic of the contacts, with mail art networks establishing loose, transitory systems of information exchange which evade hierarchy and sidestep bureaucratic control. A flourishing samizdat tradition continues to produce music, magazines, performance, and political interventions in the spirit of ironic violence perfected by Dada; plagiarism, *détournement*, and provocation remain the hallmarks of a thriving and sophisticated world of agitation.

The 1980s were marked by a series of 'assaults on culture', culminating in calls for an art strike in 1990. Challenging all conventions of identity, originality, and the very nature of cultural production, the Praxis project convened a Festival of Plagiarism which reworked situationist notions of *détournement* and challenged the hypocrisy of high art distinctions between the plagiarism and evolutionary development of techniques and ideas. Plagiarism, wrote Stewart Home, 'saves time and effort, improves results, and shows considerable initiative on the part of the individual plagiarist. As a revolutionary tool it is ideally suited to the needs of the twentieth century.'<sup>117</sup> But Praxis distanced itself from the purposeless reproductions of postmodern culture with definitions of plagiarism as 'a collective undertaking far removed from the post-modern "theories" of appropriation.... Plagiarism is for life, post-modernism is fixated on death.'<sup>118</sup> And the pamphlet accompanying the Festival reinforced the plagiarists' distance from the postmodern insistence that progress is impossible and endless reiteration inevitable.

Plagiarism in late capitalist society articulates a semi-conscious cultural condition: namely, that there 'is nothing left to say' .... The practitioners of much post-modern theory have tended to proclaim this feeling rather smugly; but if there is nothing to say,

they yet demonstrate that there will always be something to sell. On the other hand, there are practitioners active in many disciplines who, recognising the necessity for collective action demanded by media such as film and electronic tape, engage in plagiarism in an attempt to expose and explode once and for all the individualistic attitudes which tend to make all current human activity seem redundant and increasingly alienated.<sup>119</sup>

The moves against individualism and originality made in the Festival of Plagiarism were underlined by proposals for multiple names. Karen Eliot, the most popular of these, was launched in 1985 as a name to be ‘adopted by a variety of cultural workers at various times in order to carry through tasks related to building up a body of work ascribed to “Karen Eliot”’ and so ‘highlight the problems thrown up by the various mental sets pertaining to identity, individuality, originality, value and truth’.<sup>120</sup>

When one becomes Karen Eliot one’s previous existence consists of the acts other people have undertaken using the name.

When one becomes Karen Eliot one has no family, no parents, no birth. Karen Eliot was not born, s/he was materialised from social forces, constructed as a means of entering the shifting terrain that circumscribes the ‘individual’ and society.<sup>121</sup>

Hundreds of people have adopted Karen Eliot for specific works and projects precisely because recognition and reward—so often the synonyms of commodification and recuperation—are provocatively evaded by the anonymity of a multiple name. ‘Multiple names are connected to radical theories of play. The idea is to create an “open situation” for which no one in particular is responsible.’<sup>122</sup>

It goes without saying that few artists accepted the invitation to refuse creativity extended by those calling for an art strike between 1990 and 1993 to which these interventions led. Carrying a provocative ambiguity which incited confusion, the art strike reintroduced a whole range of issues around questions of strategy, recuperation, and the relation between culture and politics. Home argued that ‘most “revolutionaries” have yet to realise the importance of fighting the bourgeoisie on cultural, as well as economic and political, fronts’ and expressed the hope that ‘the Art Strike will go some way towards correcting this oversight’.<sup>123</sup> Proposed as a means of ‘intensifying the class struggle within the cultural, economic and

political spheres', and aiming 'to demoralise a cross section of the bourgeois class',<sup>124</sup> the importance of the art strike was said to lie 'not in its feasibility but in the possibilities it opens up for intensifying the class war'.<sup>125</sup> For Home, art has never been a progressive political force, and the art strike was in part an attempt to demoralise those artists who believe their work to be oppositional or subversive. Situationist demands for a poeticised and freely created environment were only ever bourgeois dreams imposed on a disinterested proletariat by an over-enthusiastic avant-garde. Situationist hopes for an aestheticised daily experience have indeed come to 'reinforce the overall position of the bourgeoisie',<sup>126</sup> and situationist demands for the suppression and realisation of art in the name of free creativity, imagination, and pleasure are reactionary desires for a new cycle of mediations which, 'in the post-modern era...serve Power in the same way that honesty, truth, progress &c., served the capitalist system in the classical modern age'.<sup>127</sup>

To demand the destruction of art in the name of creativity is merely a reform of Power. To trade off art against creativity is to take back with one hand what has been rejected by the other. Those who genuinely oppose alienated social relations will not only break with art but affirm the refusal of creativity.<sup>128</sup>

Desires for authenticity were condemned as 'the most cynical of all the pseudo-needs'. Offering 'the spectacle of its own inadequacy' for mass consumption, capitalism 'uses this spectacle as the means of reselling itself to those who "imagine" they have "progressed" beyond bourgeois values in a "return" to the "authentic"'.<sup>129</sup> Refusing all mediation and values, Praxis declared: 'ABOLISH PLEASURE/ REFUSE CREATIVITY/SMASH THE IMAGINATION/DESIRE IN RUINS/THE PRESENT IS ABSOLUTE/ EVERYTHING NOW!'<sup>130</sup>

Raising questions of authorship, responsibility, and authenticity, these adventures have contributed to debates dating back to Dada's collaborations, Tzara's cut-up poems, Duchamp's readymades, and surrealism's exquisite corpses. Surrealist arguments about who, or what, constitutes the locus of artistic production and responsibility were epitomised by an affair in which Louis Aragon, threatened with prosecution for lines in *Red Front* which enthused, 'Kill the cops, comrades!', was unwillingly defended by Breton on the grounds that poets can never be held responsible for their own works when these are merely transcripts of an uncontrollable unconscious.<sup>131</sup> And it is in

the cultivation of this sense of an anonymous, possibly ubiquitous, and uncontrollable surge of interruptive and provocative desire that those associated with Karen Eliot and the art strike have been most successful.

The strike itself, however, is a different matter. The interventions made around the Festival of Plagiarism were conceived as ‘the show-down that paved the way for the final conflict of Art Strike’,<sup>132</sup> a last attempt to subvert culture from within before the tactics of sabotage come to an end with the recognition that any participation inevitably enters into a relation of support with the system of values and economic relations it seeks to undermine. ‘Only total opposition, both theoretical and practical (i.e., silence), is irrecoverable,’<sup>133</sup> declares *The Art Strike Handbook* in an apparent vindication of Baudrillard’s claim that art ‘no longer contests anything, if ever it did. Revolt is isolated, the malediction “consumed”.’ Art ‘can parody this world, illustrate it, simulate it, alter it’, but ‘it never disturbs the order, which is also its own’.<sup>134</sup> The only value of the art strike lay in its proposal of silence, rather than silence itself; the propaganda rather than the deed. It exposed the dangers of participating in a world to which it is implicitly opposed, but the noise with which it resisted recuperation was far more powerful than silence could ever have been.

Rather more optimistic responses to the circularity of all systems of signification are those which adopt tactics of occupation rather than strike. The possibilities of interrupting systems of communication and information exchange accelerate with the potential for forgery, abuses of copyright, anonymous production, and a whole new world of simulation and reproduction generated by the accessibility of new technology. ‘The problems of tactics and strategy revolve around the question of how to turn against capitalism the weapons that commercial necessity has forced it to distribute,’<sup>135</sup> wrote Vaneigem in *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, and the relentless democracy imposed by commodity relations has indeed facilitated the appropriation of photocopiers, fax machines, screen printers, and desk-top publishers to a host of subversive, playful, and deterritorialising ends. Goods produced by high-prestige manufacturers are already faked by a booming industry of bootleggers whose reproductions of Rolex watches and Adidas T-shirts are often more prized than the mass-produced originals. ‘People don’t buy these things because they believe that they’re real,’ said one bootlegger. The shirts appeal to people because they *know* they’re a rip-off. It’s a matter of taking the piss out of the multinationals.’<sup>136</sup> On

another front, the international Anticopyright network is busy collecting, distributing, and fly-posting provocative posters. 'When a piece of alien information is placed in the sheer banks of a shopping mall or office fax a fracture appears,' declare its propagandists. 'Instant and anonymous, splattered in a bus shelter or slipped into a magazine rack it is an economic crime— enjoyment without transaction.'<sup>137</sup> Attempts to interrupt the seamless circularity of equivalent signs continue to surface.

With both Baudrillard and the situation ists, it has to be accepted that anything which is totally invulnerable to recuperation cannot be used in contestation either. The recognition that weapons can be turned against those who wield them is no reason to dispense with them altogether. 'Each word, idea or symbol is a double agent,' wrote Vaneigem. 'Some, like the word "fatherland" or the policeman's uniform, usually work for authority; but make no mistake, when ideologies clash or simply begin to wear out, the most mercenary sign can become a good anarchist.'<sup>138</sup> Nevertheless, calls for silence, disappearance, suicide, and refusals to participate in a game so difficult to play can have a powerful effect. The end of Dada, the death of Provo, the dissolution of both the SI and the Italian autonomists all testify that 'only the movements which were able to cease, to stop by themselves before dropping dead, have existed!'<sup>139</sup> Absences—of meaning, participation, reality, and identity—can constitute useful tactics in the struggle to unmask the social and economic relations of contemporary capitalist society. But their perpetration must be deliberate and intentional: although the drift into meaninglessness and the free acceptance of the commodification, silence, and apathy invited by capitalist social relations can be provocative and subversive, it cannot be turned into a universal principle which expresses, with Baudrillard, the inescapable state of the world. It is valid only as a meaningful gesture made against itself: Dada's absurdities were not performed without reason, and even its suicide was a last bid for autonomy. And knowing when to stop must not be confused with the tactics of despair: 'Let us have no more suicides from weariness, which come like a final sacrifice crowning all those that have gone before,'<sup>140</sup> wrote Vaneigem.

The despair invoked by the art strike has nevertheless engendered a variety of parodies of the intensified search for the irrecuperable, the truly radical gesture, introducing a measure of provocative humour to the world in which nothing can be said or done. Proposals by Karen Eliot for a 'thought strike' appeared in *Here and Now*, calling for 'all



theorists to pour coke on their word processors and cease to think' between 3 January 1991 and 31 September 1994. Thought is a virus let loose on the world by a self-perpetuating elite in order to market the paraphernalia of the thinker—books, papers, pens, art films, word processors, whiskey,' the statement declared. 'Thought—who needs it? We proclaim the Thought Moratorium,' to be launched at the Festival of Stupidity. 'Events already planned include short personal statements of bewilderment by several passers-by. The Festival will be immediately followed by a retrospective exhibition at the ICA entitled "Thought: was it?"'<sup>141</sup>

The thought strike, actually taken seriously by some readers, was quickly superseded by the 'Post-Serious International', a movement which 'becomes functionally inevitable at that point on the cruciality continuum when things have gone so far beyond a joke that all appropriate responses have ceased to be appropriate' and appeals for *more* thought. 'The mass Media will collapse in the face of a population intensively contemplating the possible implications of a magnetic potato for the future of furniture design.'<sup>142</sup> One of the most provocative of these *détournements* of calls for silence and suicide, 'Metastasis', was published in *Leisure* in 1990. Insisting that 'revolutionary proletarians' should 'encourage the growth of cancer in their bodies', it argues that good health 'is the technical realization of cellular creativity exiled into a beyond; it is separation perfected within the interior of the person' and calls for a 'fight against the capitalist recuperation of the creative cell. Don't let the rich get it all.'<sup>143</sup>

We cannot, of course, hope that postmodernism might make such witty or suicidal gestures. There is no movement, collectivity, or purpose in the postmodern project which would legitimate its disappearance, and since postmodernism has established itself as a social condition with neither history nor direction, demands for a postmodern suicide would be tantamount to asking the entire world to disappear, and not just apparently. But Baudrillard's insistence that all senses of originality, meaning, authenticity, and reality have abandoned us to a world of equivalent images and simulated experience invalidates all attempts to discriminate between the real Adidas logo and its copy, or the advertising hoarding and the flyposter. Asked whether his descriptions of circuits of signifiers without reference holds true not only for advertisements and TV images but all systems of signification, Baudrillard said 'Yes...all signs enter into such circuits—none escape.'<sup>144</sup> With the situationists,

we can agree that everything arising in the spectacle assumes its characteristics: interventions will always be forced to assume the equivalence and vacuity of the commodity as long as an economic system dependent on production and consumption persists: 'when images chosen and constructed by *someone else* have everywhere become the individual's principal connection to the world he formerly observed for himself, it has certainly not been forgotten that these images can tolerate anything and everything; because within the same image all things can be juxtaposed without contradiction,'<sup>145</sup> writes Debord. But the recognition that even the most radical of gestures is implicated in this process cannot be allowed to lead to petrification and silence. It must, on the contrary, serve as a springboard for subversive strategies of interruption and provocation.

With both the situationists and the postmodernists, it is certainly true that we live in an age in which anything can be used for any purpose. But it is only in the absence of any purpose that the will to distinguish between plagiaristic *détournements* and recuperations disappears; only in a world with neither domination nor resistance can we give ourselves up to the endless ecstasies of purposeless communication. Meanwhile, *détournements*, subversions, and irreverent plagiarisms continue to match the assimilations, dissipations, and recuperations which strengthen and protect capitalist society.

An idiosyncratic path to the postmodern age has been followed in this book. Uncovering some political and cultural histories, it has neglected others: the passage through feminism, for example; or the more familiar debates about postmodernity conducted in the work of theorists like Jürgen Habermas and Frederic Jameson. The structuralist and poststructuralist ideas of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, developments in and after Marxism by Althusserian theorists, and more conventional analyses of the media, consumerism, and the arts might all have been included. Psychoanalytic frameworks could have been treated more thoroughly, and a host of other themes, such as the influence of Antonin Artaud's maverick surrealism, or Alfred Jarry's pataphysical adventures, have been left out of this tale. It is, however, a book with a specific mission, which consideration of all these neglected figures would only have reinforced. In telling the story of the situationist influence on contemporary culture and insisting on the pivotal significance of the movement to a century of political, artistic, and philosophical debate, it has explored the possibilities of critical thought revealed by this history and tried to

reintroduce some sense of meaning, purpose, and passion to a postmodern discourse of futile denial.

It is 'the destiny of signs', writes Baudrillard, 'to be torn from their destination, deviated, displaced, diverted, recuperated, seduced. It is their destiny in the sense that this is what always happens to them; it is our destiny in the sense that this is what always happens to us.'<sup>146</sup> This talk of destiny seems characteristic of the slumbering and reformist fatalism which seems to dominate the political atmosphere. In Britain, the Thatcher years have reinforced perceptions of a broader loss of freedom, alleviated only by rare moments of optimism such as the students' occupation of Tiananmen Square in 1988 and the dissolution of Stalinism in 1989, both of which seemed to herald a new age of refusal and dissent which might find a resonance in western Europe as well. But the massacre in China and the beginnings of eastern European assimilation into a strengthened capitalist order have merely reinforced Debord's claims for the integrated spectacle: a global order which conducts its wars and manages its famines with a blind adherence to economic survival. 'In a certain sense', writes Debord,

the coherence of spectacular society proves revolutionaries right, since it is evident that one cannot reform the most trifling detail without taking the whole thing apart. But at the same time this coherence has eliminated every organised tendency by eliminating those social terrains where it had more or less effectively been able to find expression: from trade unions to newspapers, towns to books.<sup>147</sup>

It is difficult to dispel Debord's assertion that the situation is unique: this is 'the first time in contemporary Europe', he suggests, that 'no party or fraction of a party even tries to pretend that they wish to change anything significant.'<sup>148</sup>

But it is precisely here, with the question of what *is* significant in contemporary society, that the crises of critical thought and political action inscribed in postmodern theory have arisen. The issue of what really perpetuates existing social relations and, consequently, the form their negation might take, has been posed with increasing sophistication in every moment of twentieth-century contestation. Every possibility of contradiction has been tried and interrogated until the attempt to isolate a central contradiction between power and its other has itself been seen as the bearer of dogma and control. And out

of this awareness comes the prevailing insistence that all attempts to transform the world are themselves responsible for the domination and impoverishment which continue to mark our society. We find ourselves in a morass, certain that there is nothing to be done, overwhelmed by the failures of the past, and convinced of the culpability of our theoretical frameworks.

With postmodernism, it is true that ours is a culture about which there is nothing more to say. Baudrillard's argument that the revolutionary movements of the past have in a sense been too successful, resulting in an overproduction of meaning, rings true. But the endless cycles of reversibility, reproduction, and simulation in which we play testify not to the redundancy of critical discourse, but that of the culture it contests. Ours is a culture about which there is nothing more to say precisely because it has outlived its discursive possibilities: art, literature, philosophy, and politics can only implode and return against themselves in spirals of everdecreasing significance. And while everything is said about this imperative to repetition and return, the possibility of moving beyond it is rarely discussed. Postmodernity comes equipped with a refusal to countenance the possibilities of social transformation on which its supersession depends. Talk of revolution becomes embarrassing, and the suggestion that history has ended is embraced with open relief. Situationist desires for 'a rise in the pleasure of living'<sup>149</sup> have become the dreams of another age and no longer have anything to say to us.

But this drastic fall in expectations which seems to mark our approach to the end of the millennium is not something we are powerless to confront. Certainly it is no longer obvious that truth cannot be opposed to ideology, or life to survival; social groups and classes do not conveniently line up on opposite sides of the barricades, and the multitude of transgressive and often conflicting desires which constitute individuals and systems of social organisation can never again be ignored for the convenience of some revolutionary plan. But just as it is most useful to conspirators that the conspiracy theory of history is thoroughly discredited,<sup>150</sup> so it is very convenient for all those who would deny the possibility of social change to usher in a world in which subversion is impossible. Caught in a web in which all possibilities of dissent are countered by the immediate thought of their defeat, it is indeed more difficult than ever before to reintroduce any sense of negativity to the systems of power in which we live. No longer sure of the causes, we are more willing to dispense with them altogether than renew our search. But the scenario in which theorists

trip over people asleep on the streets on their way to declare the impossibility of changing anything is merely the tip of an absurd and tragic iceberg with which we cannot continue to live. As the world spirals into senseless, devastating cycles of war, oppression, and environmental disaster, strategies which call for even less meaning, reason, and impassioned engagement seem increasingly redundant. It may be difficult to assert the possibility of wholesale change, but it is by no means certain that the necessity to do so has disappeared.

We have, of course, been warned off such a project—and not without reason—by poststructuralist suggestions that the search for causes and contradictions depends on an untenable world view populated by a ideological understanding of history, essentialist conceptions of the subject, and illegitimate references to something better, more real, more true, and more desired than the present. There are, indeed, huge dangers here. But those associated with the blanket refusal to develop a critical engagement with these positions are greater still, for they ultimately leave us unable to say, do, or speculate about anything. It is little wonder that the world appears chaotic and boundless when we have so thoroughly denied ourselves the critical tools with which to understand it.

So where can we look for the causes, the determining principles, of this apparently indeterminate world? For the situationists, the only place to look was to the spectacle, a space privileged above all others as the organising principle of the world and its critique. And for Debord, this remains true: in the midst of all our chatterings about codes, signs, and networks of purposeless domination, the one possibility we fail to confront is also that which might allow a renewed burst of negativity. It is the commodity, he writes in *Comments*, which is always ‘beyond criticism’.<sup>151</sup> To be sure, the situationists were naïve and sometimes arrogant in their determination to find some ‘other’ to the ubiquity of commodity relations. And the proliferation of sites of complex domination and resistance which now characterise capitalist social relations may indeed have outstripped the usefulness of a critique of the spectacle. But albeit in circumstances very different from our own, they too were writing against a world of uncanny and petrifying circularity, similarly devoid of any locus of negation and all too aware of the failures of past revolutionary projects. And the overriding merit of their project was its ability to develop a historical and material analysis of the world we now call postmodernity. Seduced only by the possibilities of challenging and negating capitalist social relations, the situationists

were able to give some meaning to the apparently autonomous and incomprehensible dominion of its signs, the ubiquitous affirmation and fragmentation of its discourse, and the confusion and fragmentation of its rapid and purposeless change. For all its problems and absences, the identification of commodified relations in every area of social, individual, and cultural life threw up the possibility of new solidarities between social groups, desires, and experiences. It allowed the situationists to pose a freely constructed other to capitalist relations and inject an exuberant propaganda of the possible into a world of mundane despair and superficiality.

Spectacular discourse, writes Debord, 'isolates all it shows from its context, its past, its intentions and its consequences'.<sup>152</sup> Garbled versions of situationist imagery, attitudes, and theory pepper contemporary cultural discourse without a trace of their origins in the critique of commodity relations, and it is only too easy to characterise postmodernism—in art, philosophy, and politics—as a wholesale recuperation of the century's radical currents. And because the situationists were so aware of the dangers of recuperation, it is tempting to imagine that there are mines laid in the terrain which has been captured from them. They certainly fostered the idea that their critique would re-emerge regardless of the obstacles and recuperations it might face: 'like the proletariat', they wrote, 'we cannot claim to be unexploitable in the present conditions; we must simply work to make any such exploitation entail the greatest possible risk for the exploiters'.<sup>153</sup> In many respects, the arrogant confidence of such statements remains one of the movement's most attractive features. Perversely dogmatic, the situationists still wanted the world to have fun, and although their hostility to any of the qualities of spectacular society produced a tradition as glamorous and mystified as the commodified relations it opposed, there is still something inspiring about their declared faith in the imminence of revolution and the extravagance of their propaganda. And perhaps such arrogance is an inevitable feature of any intervention, be it in the form of political action, theoretical discourse, or transgressive deconstruction. At the extreme, it is always possible to ask with what right, rhyme, or reason anyone has for saying, doing, or imagining anything. Against doubtful poststructuralist and uncompromisingly negative postmodern responses to this question, the situationists have left a legacy of assertive confidence in the possibility of the collective construction not only of a playful discourse but impassioned forms of living too.

## 5 'FLEE, BUT WHILE FLEEING, PICK UP A WEAPON'

'Flee, but while fleeing, pick up a weapon' is a phrase from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *On the Line*, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983.

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