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Dancing in Circles. Baudrillard and Death[1]

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Abstract

With the aid of a Baudrillardian text that sociology mostly overlooked, this essay aims at highlighting the author's closeness to the mythanalytic core of French socio-anthropology, particularly Durand and Maffesoli – thinkers to whom Baudrillard has been connected by strong friendly, even more than intellectual, ties. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1984 [1976]), he puts forward a heterodox view of the social, when Modernity is still at its apex. He does so in no uncertain terms: 'symbol' and 'death' in the title mark a radical moving away from the prevailing ideology; more so the conjugation of serious things like economy and goods with fuzzy entities such as symbols, vestiges of a cultural infancy now left behind. Today this is not, however, the most appealing aspect of this book: the Modern attempt at rebuilding reality starting from the market has failed, but this is only one of the aspects of the paradigmatic collapse that is crushing the XXI century. Much more is at stake and most of it is here suggested: reversibility, cycle, death. The play of *simulacra* and the dissolution of reality are already clearly formulated, even though more can be said about the transfiguration of objects, but it is also possible to take Baudrillard's ideas beyond their intended range by focusing on a moment in his career when his path could have gone in other directions than those it actually took. It could have led him to less modern developments: the symbolic and corporeal space that is hinted at here is the Elsewhere of Modernity that in subsequent works unfortunately disappears.

Keywords: death, imaginary, objects, reversibility, symbol.

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Jean Baudrillard is one of the most well-known thinkers of the end of Modernity: his was a heterodox, extremely original mind that explored the cracks and paradoxes in the predominant ideology of his time – from the half of the XX century until his death in 2007. His *simulacra* theory, very well-known, is a visionary perspective according to which there is no reality left in our lives: what we think about as reality is a complex game of mirrors where representations refer only to themselves and to their sign value, with no link to anything real. Media and technology are guilty of this, or at least it seems so: while in ages past simulacra of first and second order still maintained some connection to an underlying order, the advent of industrial reproducibility and of the Eldorado of the image in the old and new media abolished any such relation, so that we are stranded in a perennial simulation: 'Today the whole system is swamped by indeterminacy, and every reality is absorbed by the hyperreality of the code and simulation. The principle of simulation governs us now, rather than the outdated reality principle. We *feed* on those forms whose finalities have disappeared. No more ideology, only simulacra' (1993b: 2).

This could be true. Baudrillard's thought had strong roots in Marxism, economy and semiology, so that some kind of arbitrary dynamics, where men are pushed around by external, quasi-omnipotent factors, is more than likely a key to understand the current situation: later developments in his work aim definitely in this direction. There is more to the French sociologist than this, however: among other things he had a deep friendship with Gilbert Durand and Michel Maffesoli, and his work shows a series of attempts and detours that allow for a certain interpretative freedom. An essay in maybes, what-ifs and might-have-beens might cast some new light on the complex contour of his work: perhaps we can imagine a different Jean Baudrillard, had he been less semiologist and a little more mythanalyst; with some touches of Simmelian anxiety about a rampaging objective culture and a similar need to devise a new language to express and describe radical alternatives to Modernity; exposing shadows of symbolic significance thought of as a powerful tool to break the economistic spell and boasting a brazen grin that enables him to throw its most feared enemy at the face of Western culture. *Symbolic Exchange and Death* is the step in his career where this could have happened: reality and meaning could have got put back together by some extreme symbolic short circuit. Instead, the path diverged and seduction (Baudrillard, 1991) and the triumph of the object ensued, a Piranesian, pataphysical universe where *Witz* shone on, self-satisfied and more than a bit desperate.

1. Objects

If one were to point out a common trait in Baudrillard's vast production, hypertrophic objective culture could be the best choice. Since 1968, when *The System of Objects* (1996) appeared, this seems to have been his main concern: the unfair struggle against an ever-proliferating, suffocating objectual world that slowly – not so slowly, indeed! – takes everything out of its victims: action, sense, energy. Through the centuries, things have freed themselves from any significant tie with humanity: what was once thought of as use-value, and then exchange-value – which still required some kind of sense relationship to be assessed and a connection between this relationship and reality – has now become sign-value, an arbitrary judgement that issues from references internal to the goods system and has to do with the affirmation of one's status and symbolic relevance in society:

> This revolution consists in the dislocation of the two aspects of the law of value, which were thought to be coherent and eternally bound as if by a natural law. *Referential value is annihilated, giving the structural play of value the upper hand*. The structural dimension becomes autonomous by excluding the referential dimension, and is instituted upon the death of reference. The systems of reference for production, signification, the affect, substance and history, all this equivalence to a 'real' content, loading the sign with the burden of 'utility', with gravity, its form of representative equivalence: all this is over with (1993b: 6-7).

Objects, deceptively material, are now no more than signs, simulacra of an ever higher order, unmoored from substance and meaning. This new dynamics obviously has a cost:

> Signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real (it is not that they just happen to be exchanged against each other, they do so *on condition* that they are no longer exchanged against the real). The emancipation of the sign: remove this 'archaic' obligation to designate something and it finally becomes free, indifferent and totally indeterminate, in the structural or combinatory play which succeeds the previous rule of determinate equivalence (1993b: 7).

However: is this really a cost? And if the answer is yes, who is paying it?

First of all, we should ask Baudrillard himself – with a preliminary warning: his prose is anything but straightforward, and in a time of simple, linear requests and solutions this is a challenging quality. The world we made is complex and coping with it requires adequate tools and perspectives: the

French thinker strove from the beginning to develop an original language that could at the same time *épater le bourgeois* and reach beyond sterilized formulas, common sense at its worst. This enterprise was not always successful. At times it had unexpected drawbacks. Speaking of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*'s reception, Baudrillard says: 'Everything is deemed brilliant, intelligent, but not serious. There has never been any real discussion about it. I don't claim to be tremendously serious, but there are nevertheless some philosophically serious things in my work!' (Baudrillard, 1993a: 189). His *Witz* has easily been misunderstood, taken for an exercise in art and obscurity aimed at building up his own personal, self-centred brand. Which, of course, could have been part of it.

But that is not the whole of it, however. In his unceasing interrogation of the capitalist world, Baudrillard gained some precious insights: some he fully grasped, repeatedly extending their significance and heuristic power; some he merely brushed, leaving them behind like overlooked nuggets in the mud. The vertigo of simulacra could have distracted him from making the most of the insidious relationship object/sign. Objects turn into signs and are freed from any obligation towards a man-made system of reference. From our standpoint they lose any substance. It may be argued that Western culture has been striving to achieve this end since its beginnings without realising its consequences, but for now the human perspective should be put aside and an object-centred one should be tried on. It might be said, for instance, that things just couldn't wait to free themselves from their creators' morbid embrace, to break the contradictory spell that both made and despised them in a primordial, unresolved tension between matter and spirit. After all, our world still hinges on a *Kosmosanschauung* that equates matter and energy – the former represented by a lowercase 'm', the latter by a capital 'E' – in an uneasy redemption complicated by an encroaching Dark Matter no one seems able to find.

It is a contradictorial stance that can account for the smooth transition to simulacra, this first, imaginal step towards the final dematerialization of the objective world that nano- and IC technologies make today more than possible. But again, is there a cost being paid? Objects are free from our schizophrenic requests, we are free from their cumbersome presence. Objects, though, are still objects, even if their objectual qualities are lost to our stunned senses, entangled as they are in the endless diffraction of simulacra. Objects are still clandestinely there, casting *their* spell on unaware human beings. A century ago, Simmel underlined an unexpected effect of this unperceived pressure: in the metropolis, he wrote,

> is brought to a peak, in a certain way, that achievement in the concentration of purchasable things which stimulates the individual to the highest degree of nervous energy. Through the mere quantitative intensification of the same conditions this achievement is transformed into its opposite, into this peculiar adaptive phenomenon – the blasé attitude – in which the nerves reveal their final possibility of adjusting themselves to the content and the form of metropolitan life by renouncing the response to them. We see that the self-preservation of certain types of personalities is obtained at the cost of devaluing the entire objective world, ending inevitably in dragging the personality downward into a feeling of its own valuelessness (Simmel, 1903: 5-6).

The mechanical idea of linear causality is intimately connected with Modernity. It is an idea closely related to the primeval paradigmatic choice in favour of disjunction against conjunction (Morin 1999), that establishes a rigorous separation between subject and object, putting the former under cover and reducing the latter to a neutral quantity to be manipulated with no consequences. Simmel, among the first, saw through this illusion. He built his sociology on what was lately to become a key concept of technology and IC: *Wechselwirkung* he called it, reciprocal action; feedback it is now, the inevitable retroaction that links all those that take part in a process, modifying them, leaving no one and nothing as it was before. From this standpoint, linear causality is naïve and a purely exclusive attitude untenable, as every act of exclusion slowly destroys the actor, until there is nothing left. Baudrillard shares the gist of this insight, taking it to the extreme, adding to it a new ingredient. Universality is at the root of exclusion:

> Universality is in fact based exclusively on tautology and doubling, and this is where the 'Human' takes on the force of a moral law and a principle of exclusion. This is because the 'Human' is from the outset the institution of its structural double, the 'Inhuman'. This is all it is: the progress of Humanity and Culture are simply the chain of discriminations with which to brand 'Others' with inhumanity, and therefore with nullity (1993b: 125).

There are many 'Others': 'The increasing hold of rationality on our culture has meant the successive extradition of inanimate nature, animals and inferior races into the Inhuman, while the cancer of the Human has invested the very society it claimed to contain within its absolute superiority' (Baudrillard, 1993b: 126). And every such expulsion (Sassen 2014), while intimating a false sense of cohesion and security, results in fact in an increase in pressure:

> We are happy to be promoted to the universal, to an abstract and generic value indexed on the equivalence of the species, to the exclusion of all the others. In some sense, therefore, the definition of the Human inexorably contracts in accordance with cultural developments: each 'objective' progressive step towards the universal corresponded to an ever stricter discrimination, until eventually we can glimpse the time of man's definitive universality that will coincide with the excommunication of all men, the purity of the concept alone radiant in the void (Baudrillard, 1993b: 125).

This dynamic is utterly oblivious to conjunction and mutual dependence, concepts that have no place in the Modern discourse. Morin has been trying to acquaint the West to such notions, all through his work on complexity and 'auto-eco-organization' (1990), to little avail in the short term, it would seem, but more than likely with significant consequences in the long run, as our culture gradually discovers what has been obvious to Eastern wisdom all along: 'When everyone recognizes goodness as good, there is already evil / "To be" and "not to be" arise mutually / Difficult and easy are mutually realized / Long and short are mutually contrasted / High and low are mutually posited' (Watts, 1990: 133). In the meanwhile, though, one has to sort out the results of this *furor excludendi*. There is a difference between Simmel's and Baudrillard's thought that can help understand and figure it out.

According to the German sociologist, objects are still essential to the making of subjective culture, which can be understood as an endless spiritual movement subject-object-Subject, a spiral coming back on itself – at a qualitatively higher level – after having dealt with and integrated the problematic relationship with objective otherness. Inherent in Simmel's approach is a deep respect for the objective world that comes, on one hand, from its being a direct emanation of individual creative energies; on the other, from its having made itself independent from its origin, to the point of constituting the landscape and the boundary within which human action unfolds:

> This is still the specifically human type of wealth: namely, that the products of objective life belong at the same time to a persisting objective order of values, be they logical or moral, religious or artistic, technical or legal. By revealing themselves to be the exponents of such values, or the members of such a series, they are not merely removed from rigid isolation by the mutual interweaving and systematization with which they separated themselves from the rhythm of the life process; but rather this process itself has thereby taken on a significance that could not be gained from the unstoppability of its mere course (Simmel in Frisby, Featherstone, 1998: 59).

There is a necessary *Wechselwirkung* within the subject-object-Subject spiral that is made of loss and recovery and the constant, tragic risk of missing a step: this is exactly what constitutes the fascination and mystery of our relationship with the products of our creativity.

This evolving relation is made even harder as difficulties caused by the products of industrial revolution are piled on top of those inherent in the process of objectification. The path man must follow to fulfil himself is increasingly littered with obstacles. He is destined to wander through landscapes obstructed by suggestions and occasions whose expediency and utility are ever more questionable:

> The infinitely growing stock of the objectified mind makes demands on the subject, arouses faint aspirations in it, strikes it with feelings of its own insufficiency and helplessness, entwines it into total constellations from which it cannot escape as a whole without mastering its individual elements. There thus emerges the typical problematic condition of humanity: the feeling of being surrounded by an immense number of cultural elements, which are not meaningless, but not profoundly meaningful to the individual either; elements which have a certain crushing quality as a mass, because an individual cannot inwardly assimilate every individual thing, but cannot simply reject it either, since it belongs potentially, as it were, to the sphere of his or her cultural development (Simmel in Frisby, Featherstone, 1998: 73).

This 'problematic condition' is the starting point of Baudrillard's confrontation with the objective world. Here, however, even those rare objects that still incorporate a *quantum* of spirit and, according to Simmel, could feed the virtuous spiral of self-development are missing:

> A new generation of signs and objects arises with the Industrial Revolution. Signs with no caste tradition that will never have known restrictions on their status, and which will never have to be *counterfeits*, since from the outset they will be *products* on a gigantic scale. The problem of their specificity and their origin is no longer posed: technics is their origin, they have meaning only within the dimension of the industrial simulacrum. That is, the series: the very possibility of two or n identical objects. The relation between them is no longer one of an original and its counterfeit, analogy or reflection, but is instead one of equivalence and indifference. In the series, objects become indistinct simulacra of one another and, along with objects, of the men that produce them (Baudrillard, 1993b: 55).

What is left is a malign host of things with teeth, the mockery of a promise. The crucial disconnection that leads to simulacra is another stage of the path to 'the purity of the concept alone radiant in the void'. Objects steadily oust humanity from the universe it has created for itself: the Internet of Things replaces the Internet of Man. They are smart now, instead of people, and better suited to cope with the difficulties of everyday life and of the new order in economy and organisation that has long since expelled the human component in favour of algorithms and mechanical procedures. Ironically, now that they are essentially disconnected from mankind, they are closer than ever to its unavowable desires: stripped of matter, reduced to their function, they have become invisible and immaterial, practically magical. Nanotechnologies create 'things' that from a human standpoint do not exist: their size varies from 1 to 100 nanometres, a nanometre being equal to a billionth of a metre, so that quantum mechanical effects are important to plan and predict their behaviour. They are beyond any possible sensorial detection, a ghost with no machine left. This should be fine with Western culture and yet…

The expression 'ghost in the machine' itself hints to a half-formed suspicion: the chilling possibility that all discourse of control and total transparency that makes objects and devices so dear to Modernity might be flawed. After all, fiction – which is often well ahead of philosophy and social thought in imagining long term trends in cultural development – has for quite some time been describing unsettling futures in which obvious subject-object hierarchies have been turned topsy-turvy by unforeseen consequences of technological breakthroughs. Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odissey* and the *Matrix* cycle by the Wachowski brothers should be example enough. These few scattered remarks, however, allow for another shade of meaning to be brought to light. Both Simmel and Baudrillard talk about worrisome side-effects of the Modern relationship with the objective world: according to the former, *blasé* people are finally dragged 'downward into a feeling of [their] own valuelessness', while the latter affirms that 'objects become indistinct simulacra of one another and of the men that produce them'. The crucial distinction that ensured human domination of the products of industry and technology gets blurred and the exclusive paradigm gets stuck in an unsolvable contradiction. It is the self-same crisis that was at the root of another masterpiece of dark future prediction, Scott's *Blade Runner*. In such cases, violence seems to be the only viable solution: Hauer's Roy Batty has to die so that whatever order gave him birth may survive a little longer. Replicants are too unclassifiable to be allowed to exist within a system built on separation. And even when they are separated from the start, things are more than likely to go awry, as it is masterfully made clear in the recent *Westworld* series.

What happens if and when this becomes a generalized condition? How does such a system deal with the widespread disintegration of its basic premises? If fiction has anything to say about it, one should expect an increase in violence, both on macro- and micro-levels, as both people and institutions are without tools and strategies to cope with whole legions of quasi-objects (Serres, 1982; Latour, 1993), hybrids as unclassifiable as Scott's replicants that crowd every context overturning patterns and frames, making them unusable. Violence is at the root of the paradigm: division is a violent act, one needs a Procrustean bed to domesticate diversity; straight lines to draw limits and boundaries, as post-colonial geography emblematically shows. Violence is already there, even though somewhat in disguise, it is almost a natural choice when times get rough. And violence is also contradictorial. It is fascinating that Western culture professes to hate and despise it and yet it deals in it – is permeated by it – in everyday life as well as in international relations. Western culture abhors chaos and yet it knows and fears its generative power: primordial chaos is where life came from, 'one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star' wrote Nietzsche, linking creation and disorder.

Prejudices and statements of principle, however, prevent any serious discussion about the role and management of violence, and so it is left free to rampage among bewildered people who take part in it, revel in it and do not understand how and why they do so. Once again fiction seizes this dismay and moulds it into a figure of horror, into something that powerfully constellates with ultimate fear: the zombie. Death, senseless violence, horde: zombies embody every terror that lurks at the edges of the realm of light we supposedly live in. They come in stunning numbers, chaos and destruction ride in their wake, there is no safe harbour left anywhere in the world. It would be easy to dismiss their frightful proliferation as the product of a diseased mind; there are, though, strong imaginal connections between their advent and the objectual hypertrophy described by Simmel and Baudrillard – and once again, their status is blurred: are they quasi-objects or quasi-subjects? Zombies are walking corpses and a corpse is defined by its lack of life, it is an obscene thing. Today, in a time of smart objects and super intelligent automata and robots, the difference is hard to tell: 'The process of growth is a catastrophe for the subject, as not only the acceleration and proliferation of the objectified world intensify the random dimension of chance and indetermination, but the objects themselves end up with dominating the exhausted subject, whose interest for the objectual dance turns into apathy, dizziness and inertia' (http://www.filosofico.net/baudrillard4.htm, 20/06/2017).

Proliferation, frenetic swarming is a further trait shared by zombies and things that allows for yet another interpretive shade to be added to the picture. The same chaotic agitation lies, according to Durand, at the heart of man's unease towards animality and it can be highlighted as a veritable imaginal scheme: 'It is this anarchical movement that suddenly reveals animality to the imagination and surrounds the agitated multiplicity with a pejorative aura' (Durand, 1990: 76). From a rational, self-aware point of view, this discomfort can be attributed to the contradictorial fascination that animal unconsciousness and freedom exert on convention-ridden human beings, thus constituting an unceasing menace to Ego coherence (Neumann, 1954). Durand reaches further down into human inner complexity and singles out a spontaneous reaction that accounts for this specific dynamics and could surely help understand other homologous situations: 'This primitive disgust toward agitation gets rationalised in the variant of the animation scheme that constitutes the archetype of chaos. As Bachelard observes, "in literature there is never an immobile chaos"' (Durand, 1990: 76).

Agitation, chaos, disorder, instability: proliferation seems to be at the start of an unsettling chain of associations, but the game can be taken even further: 'The accelerated animation scheme […] seems to be an assimilative projection of dread in front of change […]. Change and the adaptation or assimilation it requires form the first experience of time' (Durand, 1990: 76). Changes wrought by time are themselves surrounded by a sombre, pejorative aura: decay, exhaustion and finally death are the faces of Time that are a source of the dismay that echoes in the accelerated animation scheme. Such a scheme lights up somewhere deep any time we are confronted with chaotic events, such as a mob (not necessarily of zombies), an unusually large flock of birds – and Hitchcock comes inevitably to mind… – a swarm of micro-things, be they nano-robots or tumour cells. Death grins within proliferation, it constantly tugs at the hem of conscience and corrodes energy and character.

'We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men / Leaning together / Headpiece filled with straw. Alas! / Our dried voices, when / We whisper together / Are quiet and meaningless / As wind in dry grass / Or rats' feet over broken glass / In our dry cellar' wrote T.S. Eliot in *The Hollow Men* in 1925. The metaphor has become clearer and clearer as the years have passed: men are losing the inner spark, are quietly, irrevocably turning into broken things, way beyond the *blasé* condition. Objectual pressure is extinguishing conscience and thought and what is left is 'Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion'. Zombies are not far, the missing link is the scarecrow: 'Let me be no nearer / In death's dream kingdom / Let me also wear / Such deliberate disguises / Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves / In a field / Behaving as the wind behaves / No

nearer–' . Once the flame has gone, there is no difference between man and thing and one is left to wonder about what flame the poet had in mind: intelligence, emotion, life. Be that as it may, Eliot too saw a dark future ahead: '*This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper*'.

2. Death

The strange and disquieting relationship between man and object has been at the heart of Baudrillard's speculation since its earliest beginnings (Gilles, Sitz, 2015). He was not alone in this worry: many others could have been mentioned – Benjamin first among them – but Simmel's insight about the *blasé* seems too valuable to miss. Moreover, there are lots of harmonics, both strong and subtle, between their *Weltanschauungen* and this exercise in might-have-beens takes advantage of them, following their hypothetical course. Simmel was aware of the increasing difficulty in traveling along the cultural path towards subjectivity, as subjects are more and more likely to find no suitable objects for their needs, no *quanta* of spirit left among the multitude of industrial products. After reading *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), one gathers the distinct impression that there are tough times ahead, but some hope yet. Baudrillard might seem even more disconsolate: things are going their separate ways and man is stranded somewhere in a wilderness of mirrors, in a vertigo of simulacra further and further apart from any kind of reality. No way out, then.

But this is not precisely true. Even if subsequent developments followed this lead, in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993b) another possibility is hinted at: a reinstitution of the symbolic order might break down the vicious spiral of simulation and mend the social tissue, creating a new relational network based on Mauss' gift exchange dynamics (Mauss, 2016). 'Symbolic exchange is no longer the organising principle of modern society. Of course, the Symbolic haunts modern social institutions in the form of their own death. Indeed, since the Symbolic no longer rules these social forms, they experience it only as this haunting, and as a demand forever blocked by the law of value' (Baudrillard, 1993b: 1): from the very first lines of the book, the French thinker states the revolutionary importance of the symbolic and establishes its formidable connection with death, grasping at once the crucial centrality of the latter. Indeed the heart of the matter here is founded on three radical insights: Mauss' gift-exchange, Saussure's anagrams (Terrence Gordon, Schogt, 2017) and Freud's theory of the death drive (2010), provided that 'we […] switch the targets of each of these three theories, and turn Mauss against Mauss, Saussure against Saussure and Freud against Freud. The principle of

reversibility (the counter-gift) must be imposed against all the economistic, psychologistic and structuralist interpretations for which Mauss paved the way' (Baudrillard, 1993b: 1-2). Reversibility is the focus of Baudrillard's argument:

> At the price of paradox and theoretical violence, we witness that the three hypotheses describe, in their own respective fields […], a functional principle sovereignly outside and antagonistic to our economic 'reality principle'. Everywhere, in every domain, a single form predominates: reversibility, cyclical reversal and annulment put an end to the linearity of time, language, economic exchange, accumulation and power. Hence the reversibility of the gift in the counter-gift, the reversibility of exchange in the sacrifice, the reversibility of time in the cycle, the reversibility of production in destruction, the reversibility of life in death, and the reversibility of every term and value of the *langue* in the anagram. In every domain it assumes the form of extermination and death, for it is the form of the Symbolic itself (Baudrillard, 1993b: 2).

Reversibility is a non-Modern, revolutionary process tightly connected to death and exchange, that nullifies linear claims and obligations upon which economic domination is based. First of all, though, reversibility is *Wechselwirkung*, reciprocal action, relation. Gift and counter-gift establish a social order with no left-overs, capable of making sense out of reality; they give texture and substance to a group and to the world it has built around itself. According to Baudrillard, today this is not possible, as 'symbolic exchange is no longer the organising principle of modern society' and 'the Symbolic is precisely this cycle of exchanges, the cycle of giving and returning, an order born of the very reversibility which escapes the double jurisdiction, the repressed psychical agency, and the transcendent social instance' (Baudrillard, 1993b: 136). Cycle versus line, feedback versus linear causality: what was still thinkable in Simmel becomes here a utopian case that will be finally abandoned in favour of a kaleidoscopic hyperreality (Nadine, 2016). This might have a lot to do with Baudrillard being perhaps a bit too modern for his own sake: given another frame, the whole argument would lead in an entirely different direction. The self-same choice of terms allows for such extensive interpretation: the triad real/imaginary/symbolic opens up to other, less despairing perspectives.

As Carmagnola says, 'here the imaginary stands for a real that has already disappeared a long time since. It has the value of a referential simulacrum: images of Nature, of production, of work […]. "Real, then imaginary", writes Baudrillard in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*' (2002: 57; Butler 1999). The imaginary has no autonomous value, it is illusion and falsehood, which is

exactly what Modernity thinks about it. There are other possible interpretations, but in order to take them into account one should reject Saussure's idea that the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary. From such a point of view, the 'inevitable' drift from objects to simulacra is not so easy, nor is it so sure, because images and symbols – which are part of the fascination with objects and give them depth and meaning – are the source of a complex process of recomposition and at the same time its most efficient tools. For them to function in this way, though, they have to be thought of as meaningfully connected with subjects and reality, which is exactly what Modernity tried very hard to deny.

Durand, in his *Introduction* to *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (1990), acutely criticises these attempts at negating the imagination's heuristic power:

> Psychological phenomenology has always distinguished between signified-noumenon and signifier-phenomenon, often confusing the role of the mental image with the language signs as defined by the Saussurean school. The great misunderstanding of the psychology of the imagination – among Husserl's and even Bergson's successors – is to have mistaken […] the image for the word […]. It must be noted that although in language the choice of a sign is irrelevant because of its arbitrariness, this is never so in imagination where the image – however much degraded it might be – has always in itself a meaning that must not be sought for outside imaginal significance (1990: 24).

Here the imaginary is not a weaker, lying version of reality, but a worthy component of its overall meaning: 'The analogon that constitutes the image is never an arbitrary sign, but is always intrinsically accounted for, that is to say it is always a symbol. The abovementioned theories let the efficacy of the imaginary evaporate because they missed the definition of the image as a symbol' (Durand, 1990: 25).

In Baudrillard the object, even though it is reduced to its image, is never a symbol. It should be noted that the etymology of 'symbol' refers to the Greek *symbolon*, from *sym-ballein* that means 'get things together'. The essence of the symbol is its capacity to reunite, link signifier and signified: 'Within the symbol that constitutes the image there is homogeneity of signifier and signified inside an organizing dynamism and […] because of this the image totally differs from the arbitrariness of the sign' (Durand, 1990: 25). The fact that Baudrillard does not share this view leads him to misinterpret the essence of the Symbolic: 'The Symbolic, that Baudrillard refuses to define utopian, is anyway antagonistic, whereas the imaginary is an operation of simulation and illusion that bears all the weight of power and domination' (Carmagnola, 2002:

56). Its relational aspect is maintained, but it is declined in a divisive, Modern way, even while the whole argument is against the Modern attitude: a brutal separation is at the root of what Baudrillard calls «the political economy of the sign» (1981) and the main thesis of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* is about a similar separation regarding death itself.

From the start of his career, Baudrillard moved against the exclusive Modern paradigm sharing paradoxically its passion for dichotomies:

> In the beginning there was the object: one of the basic axioms of Baudrillard's thought might be stated so […]. Baudrillard shares with a part of his generation a certain disdain toward humanism – that is to say, toward a thought centred on the human subject: 'From the beginning,' he affirms, 'I chose this perspective because I wanted out of the theme of the subject' (Champetier, 2001, http://www.gianfrancobertagni.it/materiali/filosofiacritica/champ.htm, 20/06/17).

This Gordian attitude might well account for the flight of the simulacra from the grasp of humankind, but even so, at the relatively early stage of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, it is possible to feel a certain nostalgia for a more coherent state of the world and a furious need for recomposition that takes the destructive form of the great unknown from which Modernity recoils in horror: death.

Power is born from separation. It has been seen that the Human, too, stems from its untold Other, a residual category that grows larger and larger and threatens to leave nothing outside itself. This, however, is already a dynamic of power and cannot be true at its origin. To find the latter, one has to go further back to the primordial act of division: 'At the very core of the "rationality" of our culture, however, is an exclusion that precedes every other, more radical than the exclusion of madmen, children or inferior races, an exclusion preceding all these and serving as their model: the exclusion of the dead and of death' (Baudrillard, 1993b: 126). There is a moment when the natural cycle life/death – the uninterrupted process that characterises all nonequilibrium ordered systems that 'are sustained by the persistent dissipation of matter and energy and so were named dissipative structures by the Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine some decades ago' (Kauffman, 1995: 21) – is broken and the symbolic relation that connected them is lost. From a whole two entities are born, both non-existent in their claim to absoluteness and separate perfection. Life in itself, untainted by corruption and decay, can exist only if death is radically removed from the picture, banned to the underground or to an afterlife that acquires the hitherto unknown character of

immortality. The dead, who were themselves part of the cycle, members of the group constantly called upon in rituals for comfort and advice, are banished too and disappear, physically and mentally:

> There is an irreversible evolution from savage societies to our own: little by little, *the dead cease to exist*. They are thrown out of the group's symbolic circulation. They are no longer beings with a full role to play, worthy partners in exchange, and we make this obvious by exiling them further and further away from the group of the living, from the domestic intimacy to the cemetery: the first grouping remains in the heart of the village or town, becoming the first ghetto, prefiguring every future ghetto, but then they are thrown further and further from the centre towards the periphery, finally having nowhere to go at all, as in the new town or the contemporary metropolis, where there are no longer any provisions for the dead, either in mental or in physical space (Baudrillard, 1993b: 126).

This is, according to Baudrillard, the paradigm of all subsequent expulsions, where the exclusive logic is always taken to the extreme and culminates in a double disappearance. At first only the negative part seems to fade away, but that is an optical illusion, a game of mirrors; as soon as selective blindness establishes itself what has been negated is left unchecked and starts growing in power and menace, constantly fed by successive removals and exiles. It is like the birth of a black hole and the genesis of a binary system like Cygnus X-1, which can be taken as a perfect metaphor for this kind of diseased relation. The harsh denial of the need for reciprocity brings about a symmetrical disaster. All distinction is lost and the dark side paradoxically triumphs:

> We know what these hidden places signify: the factory no longer exists because labour is everywhere; the prison no longer exists because arrests and confinements pervade social space-time; the asylum no longer exists because psychological control and therapy have been generalised and become banal […]. The cemetery no longer exists because modern cities have entirely taken over their function: they are ghost towns, cities of death. If the great operational metropolis is the final form of an entire culture, then, quite simply, ours is a culture of death (Baudrillard, 1993b: 126-127).

The illusion of being able to master a more and more complex flux of exiles and rejections as if there was no retroaction slowly brings about the city of the dead. Zombies are already lurking in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, even though no one noticed them before. As Baudrillard could not see the creative,

unifying side of the *symbolon*, he was necessarily left with the destructive aspect of the *diabolon*. Accordingly, his version of the Symbolic is strangely one-sided:

> The Symbolic […] is a condition characterized by two fundamental aspects, the *exchange* and the *excess*. The exercise of the Symbolic implies the presence of a social collective […]. Since the community exercising its symbols no longer exists, however, the positional value of the Symbolic becomes essentially contrastive, critic. It stands opposite to a social condition marked by the supremacy of the economic exchange, to the processes of pervasive valorisation that do not spare even the most immaterial signs (Carmagnola, 2002: 56-57).

The self-same choice of terms, as has been observed, shows an insight that goes beyond the rational desperation entailed by the argument. In fact, Baudrillard knew Durand's thought quite well and was friend with Maffesoli. Even though they often quarrelled about what lay ahead of Modernity, their trajectories have much in common:

> Will the XXI century choose Baudrillard's nihilist postmodernity, homogeneous, cold and black, or Maffesoli's orgiastic one, heterogeneous, hot and colourful? Are we living the accomplishment of the metaphysical project of total domination of the world or its silent subversion? In fact one interpretation does not exclude the other and their authors share the gusto for the coincidence of opposites typical of the 'contradictory reason': each period of historical transition is marked by the radicalisation of past forms and by the proliferation of emerging alternatives. It is a concentrate of destiny hanging between the already dead and the almost born (Champetier 2001, http://www.gianfrancobertagni.it/materiali/filosofiacritica/champ.htm, 20/06/17).

A few lines from *La part du diable* (Maffesoli, 2002) will show how close they are with regard to the subject of this essay: '*The theme of domination springs forth from the denial of death*. When death is not integrated, it gets transferred on those scapegoats that are the creatures more "below". And Western history has been plentiful in showing how easy it is to define "inferior" different races, sexes, groups. In such a perspective, stigmatization may be variable, but it is nonetheless constant' (Maffesoli, 2002: 168).

The restoration of a symbolic order might indeed prevent Western societies from following the self-destructive path they seem to have taken. In fact there are signs of bottom-up processes that go in that direction, from the new culture of sharing and bartering to the widespread environmental concern. These, however, have to find a new frame of reference and

understanding, lest they end up perverted by the ruling logic of division and detachment. As Baudrillard perfectly saw, the most fundamental dichotomy that needs to be mended is still the one that opposes life and death and makes the latter impossible to think of and cope with. It is indeed peculiar that a culture that styles itself the apex of human development should be at a loss to come to terms with the most human of events, the sword of Damocles that always hangs over everyone's head. 'Primitive' societies were much better equipped to deal with life/death, as the whole process was embedded in symbolic exchange and thus made sense. Another bottom-up dynamic is underway that has a similar aim: it is what Maffesoli calls 'homeopathization of death' (2002), getting closer and closer to death as if in a dance, making the most of the reassuring power of the cycle to get acquainted with it and take the sting out of its grinning presence. It is a mix of contradictory moves and behaviours, ranging from extreme sports to palliative care, from drug and alcohol abuse to media death overload and death-defying challenge for its own sake, all of which configure a desperate need to come to grips with something that cannot be thought of as absurd without issuing the same judgement on the rest of human experience.

A fuzzy perception begins to emerge of an overpowering exigence of reversibility that stems from deeper levels of human complexity and struggles to take form and express itself. All these attempts spring from the contradictorial richness of the Symbolic that is not altogether lost to Modern societies: it is still there, as if in disguise, operating in what Beck would call 'subpolitics' (2009), giving rise to shared behaviours and movements, fostering new alliances among unlikely actors, where different levels of organisation are rejoined and start operating together for a common goal in a way unknown to fragmented Modernity. Perhaps Baudrillard could have figured this out forty years ago, if only he had followed without prejudice his intuition of the revolutionary strength of the Symbolic. Even so, his has been one of the sharpest criticisms of the economistic order, formulated in a time when its shortcomings were far from apparent and still plentiful in suggestions and innovative ideas that can help frame a new paradigm for the XXI century.

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