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Cultural Politics, Volume 7, Issue 3, November 2011, pp. 371-390 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

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CULTURAL POLITICS VOLUME 7, ISSUE 3 PP 371–390
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BAUDRILLARD'S RADICALIZATION OF FETISHISM

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ABSTRACT **Baudrillard's theories developed dramatically over his intellectual career of forty years, and throughout these years he contributed considerably to the thematic of cultural fetishism. Consistent with his conception of the consumer society, he developed the notion of sign-fetishism, and object-fetishism. These are both steps in the radicalization of Marx's idea of commodity fetishism, drawing on Freud's idea of fetishism as a perverse structure. The article notes that Baudrillard provided inventories of fetishism at regular intervals in his writings, and that these remained curiously unchanging. He contrasts the structure of fetishism with that of symbolic exchange, a cultural formation which resolves fetishism. His analysis of 9/11 is shown to be a complex combination of elements of the theory of fetishism (without**

being named as such) with that of symbolic exchange. Although Baudrillard developed the notion of fetishism to great critical effect, he did not theorize it or apply it systematically.

KEYWORDS: fetishism, sign, object, symbolic exchange, 9/11, fatal theory

> If it was possible, in the past, to speak of the fetishism of the commodity, of money, of the simulacrum and the spectacle, that was still a limited fetishism (related to sign-value). There stretches beyond this for us today the world of radical fetishism. (Baudrillard 2005b: 72)

The idea and concept of the "fetish" has had a contested checkered history since its introduction into theology and social theory in the middle of the eighteenth century by the French historian Charles de Brosses. Most theorists who have taken up the concept have been fully aware of the reasons why the notion was introduced and how it was first used in a Christian critique of primitive religions. The fetish was just one of the many pre-Christian objects identified as belonging to superstitious belief and practice. Christian discourses had to account for the fact that the coming of monotheism was a break with the past, that it was "higher" than all the "religions" that came before, placed all those earlier cultures in "limbo." Saving the souls of fetishists could only be done by conversion, in a purification that involved the elimination of the primitive, just as various forms of iconoclasm have destroyed images of god that are directly worshiped. With early sociology, the same problem emerged, but then, with all the hubris of Enlightenment rationalism, the conception of the early forms was extended to include – as well as fetishism – polytheism, monotheism, and all metaphysical forms of deism. All these subsequent theocratic forms for Comte involved the existence of a hidden realm of god or gods, inaccessible to direct human knowledge. Auguste Comte's revised visions of the Religion of Humanity, however, saw an important future for a positive spiritual power which embraced a reconstructed and guided fetishism because fetishism like science had no need for inaccessible realms: scientific objects are not objects of belief but of a demonstrated and accessible reality thus an affinity with fetishes (Gane 2006, 2007). Durkheim and Mauss held that religion's elementary sacred form was totemism not fetishism, and they indeed explicitly denounced the uncritical use of the concept. One of the central characteristics of the positivist tradition in France (from Comte to Lévi-Strauss) was that it did not regard early religions as pure mystifications and illusions, or religion as an "opiate," but as an essential and effective first system of social classificatory practices and representations of the world.[1]

Thus from the beginning there were at least two different appropriations of the idea of the fetish: on the one hand it was associated with artifice, illusion, and superstition, while on the other it was held to be a positive elementary religious form. Marx's first appropriation was that it marked a basic structure of human alienation, and his early writings situate fetishism within the problematic of alienated projection and sensuality of early culture. However later, famously in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx adopts the notion of fetishism in the analysis of the commodity form. This usage is obviously in the tradition which saw the fetish as illusory and mystifying, and the argument is developed in terms of the way in which the fetishism of commodities conceals the realities of capitalist exploitation. There is a second use of the concept later on in volume three of *Capital*, where Marx refers to abstract financial capital as pure fetish in the sense that money capital appears to have a life of its own. In the set of comparisons established in *Capital*, it is clear that Marx thought that the communist cooperative economic mode of production would effectively eliminate this fetishism and install a transparent and non-exploitative economic form. The concept of fetishism was not part of the vocabulary of Leninism or Maoism, and Althusser sanctioned the elimination of the concepts of reification, alienation, and fetishism from the discourse of Marxism. This rejection was contested by humanist neo-Marxism constructed from ideas of early Lukács, Sartre, and the Frankfurt School (which critically incorporated psychoanalytic notions of fetishism): this conception found a place in a general theory of capitalist alienation and reification. Later Žižek used the idea to critique the fetishism of the Communist Party, and the "cult of personality" in communist states (Žižek 1996).[2] While much of this writing continued the negative reading of the fetish within a social ontology of reified capitalist cultural formations, Adorno in particular attempted to give fetishism a quite different positive reading in aesthetic theory: "there is in artworks a fetishistic quality that transcends mere commodity fetishism, and which can be neither discharged nor disavowed …" (1986: 324). Thus even within the Marxist tradition the concept had a divided legacy – and it was the challenge of this complex legacy that Baudrillard faced in his analyses. Yet discussions of Baudrillard's writings on fetishism are rare (there are no examinations of Baudrillard on fetishism in Bishop 2009), and uneven (Ritzer 1999 is clearly inspired by it, but see Butler (2009: 57) for a view that sees this contribution as completely ambiguous), however Rubenstein uses it for a first-rate analysis of the political culture of the W. Bush era (2009: 151), as did Miklitsch (1998) for a remarkable Baudrillardian assessment of the Madonna phenomenon. Here I attempt to establish and assess what Baudrillard's contribution to the theory of fetishism actually has been.

BAUDRILLARD'S DISTINCTIVE FRAMING OF FETISHISM

Baudrillard's central theory of modernity concerns the genealogy of simulacra, and in this there is relatively little direct reference to or use

of the concept of reification or fetishization: why indeed is there no reference to the fetish in his well-known analysis of 9/11, the attack on the World Trade Center (WTC)? There is perhaps here a question of tact, and of theoretical tactics. Even in his original theorization of the "twin towers" in 1976 (1976, 1993), neither concepts of totem or fetish are used directly. But when Baudrillard says: "For the sign to remain pure it must become its own double" and "the two towers of the WTC are the visible sign of the closure of a system in the vertigo of doubling" (1993: 69–70) we are not far away from the concept of the fetish. Indeed his appropriation of the concept of the fetish is an uneven one, for there is on the one hand a resort occasionally to a rather conventional idea of the fetish as an image either invested with an alienated aura, or with this investment withdrawn. Examples are to be found in his examination of art, but also in his discussions of contemporary childhood, gender, and the body – which will be discussed below. Even if these examples sometimes seem to suggest Baudrillard uses a notion of fetishism that conventionally relies on projection and thus alienation, the more systematic examination of the concept that can be found in his later writings tells a different story and is an important contribution to the development of theory, both conceptualization and deployment of these concepts.

(i) The Early Considerations

It seems highly significant that the concept of fetishism can be found in his first major studies of consumer society – *The Object System* (of 1968) (whereas there is only a brief mention in *The Consumer Society* (of 1970)). Dealing with the subject of the obsessive collector of objects, Baudrillard conceived this as the "destructuring" of the object in modality that was clearly perverse. Indeed, right from the start, Baudrillard used psychoanalytic terms as well as Marxist ones: "If perversion as it concerns objects is most clearly discernable in the crystallized form of fetishism, we are perfectly justified in noting how throughout the system, organized according to the same aims and functioning in the same ways, the possession of objects and the passion for them is, shall we say, *a tempered mode of sexual perversion*" (1996 [1968]: 99, italicized by JB; for an account of the Freudian notion, see Grosz 1995: 141–54). When Baudrillard identifies fetishized objects, we encounter his first inventory, which emphasizes the investment of the body part, or material object:

> A particular woman is no longer a woman but merely a sex, breasts, belly, thighs, voice and face … The regressive tendency, ever more specialized and impersonal, may converge on the hair or the feet, or, ultimately, crystallize – at the opposite pole to any living being – on a garter or a brassiere … (1996 [1968]: 99–100)

In these early essays, Baudrillard restricted the scope of the concept, briefly noting for example very crudely, that "any object has something

of the gizmo about it, for in proportion as its practical instrumentality fades it becomes susceptible of cathexis by a libidinal instrumentality" so that it becomes "a substitute for the phallus" (1996 [1968]: 117). A technical object can become a fetish for colonized tribal people where it becomes a sign of colonial power (1996 [1968]: 82, 117). These passing references are rethought in an essay of 1970 called "Fetishism and Ideology: The Semiological Reduction" first published in *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* and included in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981 [1972]). Here he critiqued the use of fetishism to describe any object as a fetish: automobile fetishism, sex fetishes, vacation fetish – in fact, he rejected this use as being parasitic on the Christian denunciation of primitive cults (1981 [1972]: 88); it is also perhaps not even a concept but a metaphor (1981 [1972]: 89). At this point, his critique here runs parallel to that of Althusser's critique of alienation theory as wrongly positing a recoverable ideal humanist essence, and it might, he reflects, be better to drop the term altogether than to use it indiscriminately (1981 [1972]: 90).

Working through this problem, however, he suggests that the problem can be rethought through a critical analysis of Marx's notion of the fetishism of the commodity form, it is the *code* that frames the "sign-object, the object eviscerated of its substance and history" (1981 [1972]: 93). With money fetishism the framing itself becomes the object of a perverse drive to acquire a systematically enclosed abstract perfection (like the perverse obsession for the completion of any collection.) So, in the analysis of the body in consumer society (defined as a society consuming signs) and specifically the cult of the body beautiful, "it is the sign in this beauty, the mark (make-up, symmetry …) which fascinates; it is the artefact which is the object of desire" (1981 [1972]: 94). Thus an analysis of fetishism, if it can be justified, must move from the object, the "golden calf," to the sign-system – and as such the fetish-sign can be found in all kinds of cultural systems. He gives a second inventory:

> Tattoos, stretched lips, the bound feet of Chinese women, eyeshadow, rouge, hair removal, mascara, or bracelets, collars, objects, jewellery, accessories: anything will serve to rewrite the cultural order on the body … The erotic is thus the re-inscription of the erogenous in a homogeneous system of signs … whose goal is closure and logical perfection. (1981 [1972]: 94)

Baudrillard was, however, already moving to a more complex position, for after briefly examining Freud (division of the body in castration etc.) and Marx (division of the body in work etc.), he looks briefly at the contribution of Georges Bataille and his analysis which noted that the meaning of the naked body could only be grasped by comparing its appearance in a genuinely symbolic order with that of the fetishistic order (1981 [1972]: 98). The contemporary cultural system with its positivization of the body (based on need, satisfactions, and rights)

eliminates ambivalence and reduces the body to a semiological system (e.g. of fashion signs). The ideological process itself is this reduction of the symbolic order (and not as with Marx the process of mystification of exploitation). There is at this point in the discussion a very brief look at Georges Bataille's idea of the basic fetish, the Sun (for Comte it was the Earth) and how the semiological reduction works. Thus for Baudrillard a fetishistic order involves an "abstract totalization" which "permits signs to function ideologically, that is, to establish and perpetuate real discriminations and the order of power" (1981 [1972]: 101).

The framework for thinking about fetishism became clearer in the mid 1970s with the publication of his major work, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. This work fleshed out the idea of primordial cultural forms, particularly the importance of the play of the self and other. Radical otherness or alterity was examined as an essential feature of the dynamics of birth, death, gender, social division, and the life of groups. The analysis drew on anthropology that suggested that "primitive societies" did not, however, suffer a primary alienation, indeed all cultures up to the eighteenth century were structured on a system of radical alterity, a constituent feature of their cultures which were based not on fetishism (following Comte) but on symbolic exchange – adopting Mauss's analysis of gift exchange (2002: 30). Baudrillard tries to avoid in the main the current vocabulary of the social sciences. In dealing with modern societies, he draws on terms from Marx for the analysis of capitalism, from Nietzsche for modern cultures, a range of sociologists for terms like "anomie," "simulacra," and modern science for chaos theory, relativity, singularity, etc. He does draw on the modern vocabulary of anthropology, terms such as "la part maudite," "ritual," and "symbolic exchange." What makes this into a new radical theory is that the cultural analysis is also framed in a critical appropriation of Freud and Lacan and introduces a critical variation: neither the real (and reality principle) nor the fetish are primary terms. Thus there are three fundamental features in societies where symbolic exchange is dominant. The first is the incest taboo; the second, the alliance of the living and the dead founded on initiation; and the third is the non-alienated relationship between self and its alters (its double, spirit or shadow). This third fundamental feature of the symbolic order situates agency within a structure of "duel" relations of self and Others. These agencies converse with, confront, and play in a pact lodged in a system of exchanges. Following Nietzsche closely (not Marx) Baudrillard argues that alienation, on the other hand, only arises with the formation of the image of the other as an abstract and irreconcilable agency – modern alienation begins first with the internalization of the instance of the master by the emancipated slave and contemporary alienation with the internalization of the (self-managing) competitive entrepreneur by the neoliberal individual.

Baudrillard's theory opens up, unlike that of Lévi-Strauss, beyond a genealogy of alienation, the possibility of a new semiotic analysis of the false-real, and the false-sacred. The model of this kind of analysis

is presented as the orders of simulacra (notably analyzed by Genosko as a semiotic genealogy (1994)). A first order of simulacra can be seen in the representations of the body and the world in the renaissance period: the model of the human automaton, in *trompe l'oeil* forms, and are represented in media like stucco (Genosko: corrupted symbol). With the explosive industrial revolution and the beginnings of mass production, a second order of simulacral forms comes into existence as mass reproduction: the human is represented in crude mechanical robotics, and mass (re)production of commodities in new media like plastic (Genosko: icon). But this second order is still based on the principle of utility where production and reproduction arise from an original hand crafted object. This gives way with the implosive advent of the consumer society to the emergence of the "system of objects" – a society dominated by computerized mass media images (Genosko: sign). Baudrillard's challenging theory is that this affects all domains: relation to the order of things is not only subject to mass media, particularly televisual mediation (which shifts cultural phenomena into the hyperreal), but also with the matrix revolution (which shifts simulacra into simulational forms). The transition from this third order to fourth-order simulacral forms arrives with the full long-term impact of the information revolution which leads to the greatest rupture of all, an apocalypse which occurs without protagonist or victim, neither explosive nor implosive: both the "integral realization" and the "virtualization" of the world (Genosko: the index). All these orders are discussed without reference to alienation and reification, yet it is clear from the language Baudrillard uses, especially in relation to the sign, that this genealogy is a study of semiotic duplicity (the copy, the reproduction, the clone), of which the emergence of "the real" (and the various formations of "reality") is a part. If Genosko's analysis confirms the theoretical rigor of Baudrillard's analysis (and at no point does Baudrillard attempt to systematize it), there is no place for the concept of the fetish in the orders of simulacra.

As we have seen, the analysis of the fetish is linked to the consumption of signs and objects. Whereas in his first two studies (*The System of Objects* (1996 [1968]) and *The Consumer Society* (1998a [1970])) there is only limited mention of fetishism, in 1976 there is a new account of contemporary cultures based squarely on a radicalized Freudianism. Comparing the chapter on "The Body" in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* with that of *The Consumer Society* is instructive in this respect. In the earlier account there is an analysis of the "sex-exchange standard" in which the "erotic system' has been liberated in a context of class decomposition (1998a [1970]: 143–4). The analysis of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* in the chapter on the body is more precise: instead of the sex-exchange there is the "phallic-exchange standard" and it is this conceptualization that opens the door to a wide ranging analysis of neo-fetishism. Here he gives a further, a third inventory:

> a made-up mouth ... its beautified lips, half open, half closed, are no longer used for speaking, eating, vomiting or kissing ... The painted mouth, objectified like a jewel, derives its intense erotic value not, as one might imagine, from accentuating its role as an erotogenic orifice, but conversely from its closure – paint being as it were the trace of the phallic, the mark that institutes its *phallic exchange-value*: an erectile mouth. (1993: 103)

While the phallus as a "general equivalent" is fetishized, "an immense labour of phallic simulation at the same time as the endlessly repeated spectacle of castration," the "object-sex" is never fetishized (1993: 103). In contemporary system the human subject is "enmeshed in fetishism: through the investment of its body, it is the subject that is fetishized by the law of value" (1993: 107). The contrast is again with signs in a symbolic order: they are consumed in symbolic exchange (the exchange involves the "whole body"). Baudrillard thus challenges the way Freud's theory has been deployed and offers a utopian alternative vision: one must "leave the white magic of phallic identification in order to recognise [one's] own perilous ambivalence so that the play of desire as symbolic exchange becomes possible once more" (1993: 123).

Theoretically therefore Baudrillard has reached an important if surprising conclusion: fetishism is a product of the modern sign-system, not a feature of primary cultures where it is diverted in symbolic exchange (there is no general equivalent that makes semiotic exchanges possible), except in a situation of colonial contact (1996 [1968]: 82).

(ii) From the 1980s

If we examine Baudrillard's writings a decade later, for example on part objects in *Seduction*, we find a theoretical shift further towards the anthropology of Mauss and away from Freud (see remarks in Gane 1993: 58). He repeats the idea taken in *For A Critique*: "seduction lies in the aura of secrecy produced by weightless artificial signs and not in some natural economy of meaning, beauty or desire" (1990a: 90), and his examples are familiar, as we encounter a fourth inventory:

> covering the body with mud, deforming the skull or filing the teeth in Mexico, deforming the feet in China, distending the neck, or making incisions in the face, not to mention tattoos, jewelry, masks, fine raiments, ritual paintings, or even the bracelets made from tin cans worn by present-day Polynesians.

Here

> nothing exists naturally, *things exist because challenged, and because summoned to respond to that challenge*. It is by being challenged that the powers of the world, including gods, are aroused; it is by challenging these powers that they are exorcised,

> seduced and captured … A radical metaphysics of simulation, it need not even concern itself with "natural" harmony. (1990a: 91)

The argument is that such ritualized signs are there to signify "but with signs that strictly speaking have no meaning" (1990a: 91). In the primary cultures such marks, objects, forms, challenge "the powers of the world, including the gods" to exist; "it is by challenging these powers that they are exorcised, seduced and captured" (1990a: 91). Thus the outcome of this process in later cultures is ironic since it now permits a kind of return to the metamorphosis of forms that characterize the primary symbolic order itself, but of course now there is an inversion: in the symbolic order (another comparison):

> The gods, the soul and immortality, all those things which have been termed superstitions or fetishism, were still a spiritual, metaphorical extrapolation of man's faculties, including the body as a metaphor of resurrection. They were, admittedly, artifacts … and ones which retained a projective force, along with the power and play of illusion. Whereas, with biology and genetics, we are in pure materiality … We are no longer dealing with an imaginary prosthesis … but with a material prosthesis – a simulation much more destructive than the illusion of the soul. (1994: 97–8)

As we enter semiotic cultures in which radical alterity disappears, not only does this bring about a situation where the "other has to be produced imperatively as difference" (2002: 51), but also one that "secretes that other invisible, diabolic, elusive alterity, that absolute Other, the virus" (2002: 2), since the means and function of seduction have also radically changed. One might even say with Marx fetishism now mystifies and hides the injustices of exploitation; for Baudrillard, fetishism is a symptom and mystification at the sites at which that other alterity emerges as a response to "de-symbolization" (2002: 2). Examples of his recourse to the concept of fetishism (which echo his usage of 1968 (1996 [1968]: 82–3) are to be found in his discussion of contemporary childhood,[3] gender,[4] and the body,[5] and capitalism (Rubenstein 2009 also discusses very insightfully its use in Baudrillard's political analyses).

If Baudrillard had occasional recourse to a conventional notion of the fetish, he was developing other analyses, particularly with respect to art (Butler 2009). Modern art itself no longer stands back, he suggested, as it did in the classic period, it merges with the logic of modern consumerist culture in such a way that it colludes with its fundamental processes (promotional advertising).[6] In his later writings Baudrillard outlined a theory of a "fourth" order of simulacra. This is the order of radical uncertainty and chaos, beyond the dominance of the code. Modern painting, for example, he suggests "could be characterised as the simplified form of the impossible exchange … the best discourse about a painting would be a discourse where there is nothing to say,

which would be equivalent of a painting where there is nothing to see" (Baudrillard 1997: 9).

His terminology for thinking some of these issues moved away in the 1990s from that of simulacra and simulation, to a consideration of forms of illusion and disillusion (2005a). Primitive cultures are always a form of "seduction" and "fundamental illusion" a "vital illusion of appearances" before interpretation and aesthetics came into existence. The realm of modern aesthetics is in Baudrillard's view an attempt to banish this world of radical illusion by mastery of radical disillusion. Thus the emphasis shifts in modern culture away from absence towards presence and above all to reality and its types – surreality, hyperreality, virtual reality, and integral reality. Ironically, the long-term logic of the modern aesthetic abolishes the hypothetical distinction between sign and reality in simulation and virtual reality, so that both the real in a sense disappears and with it the type of image and imagination which accompanied it but at the same time it moves even further towards a fundamental, banal, literal reality.[7]

There are different – vital or banal – responses here. The vital "poetic transference" in "acting-out" when, "skipping the stage of the real object and its signification," Marcel Duchamp "sets up his bottle rack as a museum fetish, striking in one go at the classical organization of both the sign and the aesthetic universe" (2005b). And Warhol marks the moment when the simulacra eliminated the old unity of representation (real and its image) and became pure, unconditional simulacrum, the "transaesthetic illusion": this is Baudrillard's favored vital reaction which occurs "when Nothingness emerges at the very heart of the system of signs ... It is the proper task of poetry to raise the Nothing to the power of the sign – not the banality or indifference of the real ... Warhol turns nullity and insignificance into an event which he transforms into a fatal strategy of the image" (2002: 184). Baudrillard's own project here is to identify what is involved in the mastery of symbolic forms (Gane 2008a).

This search is significant. Baudrillard has perhaps even looked at it as a difference between the ironic and the democratic strategies:

> Everything produced today is perhaps ultimately just this: kinds of objects fetishized in their transparency and insignificance, without value judgements, without references and without history; objects substitutable for one another, as are most artworks today, in a kind of generality and globalization of inspiration which produces a universal radiance of culture of maximum extension and zero value. But when Warhol practises this kind of universal promotion of art, it's with a fierce irony and on the basis of an irrevocable liquidation that is quite different from the cultural democracy on the agenda ... (1998b: 107)

He returns several times to Warhol, and his developing analysis is pertinent here. In *The Consumer Society*, he remarked "there can be

no worse arrogance for art than to pose as machine-like, no greater affectation … than to devote himself to serial automatism" (1998a [1970]: 181) However by the 1990s he said Warhol's declaration "I would like to be a machine" was nothing less than "mechanical snobbism and I like that kind of provocation … Warhol freed us from aesthetics and art." Here we have "disenchanted fetishes, purely decorative objects … fetishes are similar to sexual fetishes, they are indifferent" (2005b: 125–6). Thus "Warhol is the first to bring us modern fetishism, transaesthetic fetishism – that of an image without quality, a presence without desire" (1996 [1968]: 75–6), describing it as "[t]hat peculiar form of fascination which fetishes alone attract, that fetishistic aura which attaches to the singularity of the void" (1996 [1968]: 79). He adds: "Whereas there is a deferred relationship between signs, there is an immediate chain reaction between fetishes because they are made of an indifferent mental substance" (1996 [1968]: 80) and here even ideas can be fetishized – as long as meaning is withdrawn. This is a paradoxical not a critical space. Warhol is not melancholic since "he has invented the joy of the machine" (1996 [1968]: 83), "rendered the world more illusory"; and as he does not represent the world he has become "a fragment of it: a fragment in a pure state" (1996 [1968]: 84). With Warhol we see the "rise and rise of the sign which losing all natural signification, shines forth in the void with the full gleam of its artificial light" and this is the pure and empty form of the image, "its ecstatic, insignificant iconry." In this new order of fetishism, all those who have not become "true snobs" are merely artists (1996 [1968]: 79). In the fourth order, the fetish returns the object to the literality of the world.[8]

Thus, despite himself, Baudrillard seems to have a meta-aesthetic which condemns on aesthetic grounds certain kinds of aesthetic enterprises. Another example is his clear rejection of New York "simulationists," and art exhibitions of "plasticised, vitrified, frozen excrement, or garbage" which do not form an irruptive moment of clarification but simply a form of aesthetic disillusion. A new literality: whereas with Warhol it is a triumphant illusion, with others disillusion. Thus the contemporary art object now takes a new shape. It is, he suggests, an exemplary instance of "the simplified form of the impossible exchange," a situation in which it is the void, nothingness, which becomes obsessive. In this sense the central issue of modern art is how it materializes this nullity "and within the limits of indifference to play the game according to the mysterious rules of indifference" (1997: 10). Having reached this stage of literality, of "integral reality," the new higher order art fetish – triumphant (or disillusioned) and banal – there is no longer "room for critical judgement" (2002: 184).

Baudrillard's mature theoretical framework here becomes fully established. What catches his attention (perhaps in critical extension of Adorno) alongside the sentimental and banal object of commodity-exchange fetishism (in its Marxist and negative, alienated connotation) there is both the second-order banal fetish in its integral reality, and

the emergence of a fatal highly charged object. Baudrillard prefers, in his later writings, to extend Baudelaire's notion of the absolute commodity: this contrasts fetishism (in its Marxist and negative, alienated connotation) with fatal strategies of the object-fetish, a "new and triumphant fetish and not a sad alienated one" in the second, third and fourth simulacral orders (Baudrillard 1990b: 118; 1983: 134).

In effect, Baudrillard's thinking on fetishism has always been linked to a small number of examples, often given as lists, at the same time working through a basic theoretical problematic. His later writings dwell more on this problematic, and try to develop it, as in the following reflection:

> So, initially the real object becomes a sign: this is the stage of simulation. But in a subsequent stage the sign becomes an object again, but not now a real object: an object much further removed from the real than the sign itself – an object off-camera, outside representation: a fetish. No longer an object to the power of the sign, but an object to the power of the object – a pure, unrepresentable, unexchangeable object – yet a nondescript one. An object of a "nondescript singularity" (Agamben), like sexual fetishes which themselves become wholly objects of desire. One may talk about substitution and perversion here, but what is involved is an entirely different organization: a transmutation of the sign into an object, and hence a redoubled simulation, charged with a redoubled intensity. By this perilous leap into a double abstraction, the fetish becomes invulnerable: and here the subject is definitively protected from the object of his desire. (2001: 129)

This theorization of the fetish in his last writings – just prior to the great crash of 2008 – suggests that we are dealing with a new situation: in the digital, the virtual, the fourth order, there is a higher fetishism – the passion for money, connected with a new integral fetishism that has passed through all the stages of hyperreality far beyond its role in the reproduction of capital:

> This absolute reality is also that of money when it passes from the relative abstraction of exchange-value to the purely speculative stage of the virtual economy. Marx in his day argued that the movement of exchange-value was more real than mere use-value but, in our situation, where capital flows are unrelated to commodity exchange, money becomes an even stranger hyperreality: it becomes absolute money; it attains the Integral Reality of calculus. Being no longer the equivalent of anything, it becomes the object of a universal passion. The hieroglyph of the commodity has become the integral fetishism of money. (2005b: 29–30)

A number of conclusions can be drawn, he suggests. First, each such singularity becomes its own horizon, it has no equivalent. Secondly, "between them there can, therefore, be only a play of metamorphosis … on the basis of their non-existence as self-being" (2001: 130–1). Developing these ideas he still held on to his basic inventory, for in a discussion with Enrique Noailles, he ventured another, a fifth:

> According to Freud, it's the substitute object for the sexual relation. So it's no more sexual in itself than the fetishized commodity is a material object. It's an abstract prosthesis, a kind of disembodied mental object – an article of clothing, a shoe, a jewel, an accessory – in which the impossible exchange of sex is gathered and crystallized. It is, if you like, an idol, but it's no longer a sign. It's meaningless in itself, but it takes the place of everything. Of everything that cannot take place. Which means that it can't be exchanged for anything. It is, in a sense, a pure object – an artefact, an artifice (this is the literal sense of the word "fetish"). (Baudrillard and Noailles 2007: 16)

Here the fetish is a pure idol; previously it was an insignificant icon, a pure object. The terminology varies but the basic concept is clear.

The account Baudrillard draws of the potentialities of current cultural developments looks remarkably like a return to the chain of metamorphoses of symbolic exchange. But with a dramatic inversion. The symbol passed to the dominance of the sign, but now the sign has split apart: on the one hand there is the world of virtual reality and on the other the new world of integral reality. This is a world of "objects which, like the fetish, have no reference, no meaning, no cultural value properly so-called" (1998b: 107) and when we become "the fetish objects of a thought that is no longer ours" (1998a [1970]: 115).

(iii) 9/11

At this point we can return to the analysis of the twin towers of the WTC, which Baudrillard had referred to many times before 2001. An extraordinary reference was made in short piece on architecture written in 1999:

> The wonder of that building is that it puts on a fantastic urban show, a marvellous show of verticality, and is, at the same time, the glaring symbol of the fate the city has succumbed to; it is the symbol of what the city died of as a historical form. This is what gives such architecture its power: it is a form of extreme anticipation of a lost object and, at the same time, of retrospective nostalgia for that object. (2003b: 137)

It seems clear that Baudrillard's analysis of the WTC is surprisingly complex (Gane 2004). We might notice that he made different kinds of analysis, and that he was very aware of this. Baudrillard suggests that

it is necessary to find the "living currency" of the event (Baudrillard and Noailles 2007: 128). This concept drawn from Klossowski (1997), which appears many times in Baudrillard's writings, especially in the book *Impossible Exchange* (where the translation is "living coin"), is expressly developed in opposition to fetishism. Whereas absolute money is the absolute fetish, a disembodied sign, living currency is the merging of signifier and signified (David Nebreda photographs his own body as he dies (2001: 125–6)). But Baudrillard seems to fail to find the living currency of 9/11. The closest he comes to this is perhaps his attempt to see the sculptor Michael Richards in his 92nd-floor studio in the WTC, as actually producing a sculpture of himself being destroyed by a plane, as he himself is killed in the event (2005b: 117).[9] Perhaps some of the many phone calls from the towers after they were struck (over a thousand calls were made in ten minutes) might contain what Baudrillard was looking for. Baudrillard has, though, remarked that these "real-life echoes of certain death correspond to a different phantasm [from the television images, MG]: that of having lived that indescribable death from the inside – the illusion of experiencing the event to the end" (2006: 54).[10] The mode of analysis that does dominate the writings is not a critical, or living currency, or aesthetic ("Let us retain for events the power of the event" (2006: 34)), but a fatal analysis, one that focuses on the symbolic importance of the towers (see Merrin 2005: 98–114), and Genosko has written impressively on the impossible exchange of the event (2006). Baudrillard's analysis of 9/11 written in 2001 draws on many of the elements from his thesis in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976, 1993): the fact that there are two towers "puts an end to any original reference" but now adds "as though architecture, like the system, was now merely a product of cloning" (2003b: 38–40). There is a brief reference to the Beaubourg Centre in Paris (about which he wrote a famous essay (see Gane 1991: 141–56)), "These architectural monsters … have always exerted an ambiguous fascination … [and] with the WTC something particular is added: precisely their symmetry and twinness" (2003a: 42). The towers were an "emblem," a "symbol of financial power," they were "a symbol of omnipotence, by their absence they have become the symbol of the possible disappearance of that omnipotence…" (2003a: 47). But the originality of Baudrillard's fatal analysis lies, not merely in the thesis that the doubling marked the recognition of a new stage of neoliberalism, but in the following: "the two towers are both a physical architectural object and a symbolic object (symbolic of financial power and global economic liberalism) … One might think the physical destruction brought about the symbolic collapse. But in fact no one, not even the terrorists, had reckoned on the total destruction of the towers. It was, in fact, their symbolic collapse that brought about their physical collapse, not the other way around" (2003a: 44).[11] Given Baudrillard's conception of fetishism as entailing the perfection of a closed system, there is little doubt that the towers are fetishes; "perfectly balanced, blind communicating vessels" (1993: 69; 2003a: 42), and in 1976 there is even a confirming reference to the

serial works of Warhol: "every Warhol does this: the multiple replicas … are of course at the same time the death of the original and the end of representation" (1993: 69–70). Thus the towers are fetishes, but the word is never used. This is because the towers are also emblems, symbols that do signify something – the end of competitive capitalism, the omnipotence of financial power.[12] If "The collapse of the towers is the major symbolic event" (2003a: 43), we might add that this is because the towers were many different things: fetishes, emblems, signs, and symbols (Baudrillard noted: "symbolic in the weak sense" (2003a: 43)).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is possible to clarify some aspects of Baudrillard's recourse to the idea of the fetish and fetishism. First, it seems clear that he uses both the pejorative and the positive notion of the fetish (the subtleties of these distinctions can be a trap for the unwary reader (Butler 2009)). Second, that he charts the development of a first-order fetishism of the commodity and sign-system (of hyperreality) to a second order of radical fetishism (of integral reality). In this development he suggests that the radicalization itself has an effect or indeed is an effect of a transformation of the distance between the subject and the fetish, so that the fetish is detached from the subject. If then it is no longer a "perverse" object, and the subject is protected from it, it is possible to ask what Baudrillard's critique amounts to, for it might it not be the case that radical fetishism is simply the characteristic of advanced consumerized cultures? Baudrillard's response seems to have changed over the course of his writings. In the early writings there is a strong appeal to the idea that consumer culture was constructed on a perverse model and a destructive cultural logic. If the idea of normality and perversion is abandoned, the account of a culture which seeks to "cleanse everything, to exterminate death and negativity" (2003c: 92) is pursued in a theoretical analysis of complex objects with greater lucidity. In this theorizing the concept of the fetish has a unique place. Baudrillard flirts with it. He exploits its power to evoke a primal response. He plays with it as a central concept of his idea of the current stage of simulation. Yet at the same time he refrains from using it at key points in analysis where it is nonetheless being applied.

Baudrillard's treatment of fetishism therefore can be seen to be characteristic: a sustained attempt to analyze contemporary cultures without falling into the omni-present reductionism of both Marxist critiques (materialist reduction to the economic) and culturalist critiques (idealist reduction to dominant values and their conflicts). Characteristic also in the sense that although there is powerful theoretical rigor, there is no attempt to close off a systematic theory as such (see Miklitsch 1998: 61–95). Evidently there is a developing and changing repertoire of theoretical terms, and their deployment is a more or less well-judged strategy. Baudrillard clearly avoids the essentialist trap of humanist uses of the concept (as critiqued by the

Althusserians) in elaborating his analysis of consumer society. This allowed Baudrillard to confront the contemporary scene in a way which was never available to the Althusserians or to those social theorists who could not engage with the principal forms of neoliberalism: postmodernism, consumerism, and what Baudrillard called its "trans-political forms." If Foucault indeed offered a brilliant mode of engagement with neoliberalism, clearly identifying the way it inverted many of the basic techniques of classical liberalism (see my discussions, Gane 2008b: 352–63; 2009: 20–5), Baudrillard offers a parallel and complementary, and in the end a far more powerful and sustained cultural and political critique. The fundamental irony of neoliberalism as pointed out by both Foucault and Baudrillard is that in attempting to combat socialist state planning and welfare culture, its effective interventions (governmentalities, transpolitizations) lead to a more insidious far-reaching social and political penetration than anything imagined by the socialists. Whereas Foucault seemed to be moving in the direction of experimental forms of counter-conduct, Baudrillard was searching for the forms in which fetishism could be resolved in symbolic exchanges. But if radicalized pure fetishism could lead to a strange form of re-enchanted banality (nullity), so to could it be revelatory of the way that neoliberalism opened an unprecedented stage of the destruction of forms and values. Baudrillard, with unrivalled courage and lucidity, read the world as bifurcated into banal and extreme events, as prey to catastrophic collapses and reverses, as divided between virtualization and realization.

NOTES

1. In fact, Baudrillard notes the importance of totemism in a brief reference to "the poverty of the sign codes of archaic systems" and to the "arbitrary totemic signs [which] are the conduit by whose means a social order makes itself apparent in its durable immanence" (1996 [1968]: 182). There is a large literature on fetishism, see for major discussions Apter and Pietz (1993), Fedi (2002), Kaplan (2006), Malt (2004), McClintock (1995), Miklitsch (1998), Stratton (1996). Antoine Hennion and Bruno Latour have also raised the question of the limits of "anti-fetishism" (Hennion and Latour 1993; Latour 1996: 26).
2. Žižek, interestingly, also refers to "Western Buddhism" as a fashion which "perfectly fits the *fetishist* mode of ideology in our allegedly "post-ideological" era … [the] fetish is effectively a kind of *inverse* of the symptom' (Žižek 2001: 13).
3. Imposed on the child now, he noted in a short article on childhood, is the system of human rights and the culture of the Internet which displaces the symbolic relation with adults as Other and the moment of symbolic break with parents, there is now either a passive complicity or – possibly violent – rejection: as childhood disappears it is absorbed into the system of differences. The image of the child changes as childhood is invaded by notions of equality

and rights on the one hand, and as it is absorbed into virtuality and accelerated time. The child becomes an alien monster, as another reactive elusive alterity is produced against the process of the elimination of the radical alterity of infancy and adolescence. The classic bourgeois image of the innocent child becomes fetishized and takes its place in the museum of extinct species (Baudrillard 2002: 102–6).

4. The analysis takes a different form in his consideration of the ways that in modernity women lose their status of otherness and enter the system of differences. His analysis of this suggests that the way this developed was out of a period of the crisis of masculinity in the nineteenth century when the feminine side of men was projected onto the emerging woman as an equal (but with the masculine as the model): the lost woman as Other replaced with a fetishized image (produced by the dominant sex). And here there is a change of relation to the body (it also loses its status as Other): "Everyone treats his/her body as man treats woman in [a] projective identification …: he invests it as a fetish in a desperate attempt at self-identification" – it, the body, like the image of the woman, becomes fetishized (Baudrillard 2002: 51–6).
5. Genetic modification, and cloning, of the human body introduces, according to Baudrillard, a modification that is "pure materiality … the artificiality is no longer that of a deferred end, but of a prothesis, a *literal* fetishism, in the sense that it is the literalness of the same and its reproduction" (1994: 98; italics JB).
6. Baudrillard does not refer to the surrealists appropriation of the fetish (on which see Malt 2004), but his approach can perhaps be inferred from his remark that "The surrealist metaphor defines itself as a compromise formation, as a short-circuit between the two orders of functionality (here transgressed and made ridiculous) and the symbolic (distorted and made into a phantasm)" (1981 [1972]: 193), where the fetish object seems to be a ridiculous phantasm (see Malt 2004).
7. Baudrillard had already remarked that in modern art "it is no longer the literality of the world, but the literality of the gestural elaboration of creation – spots, lines, dribbles" (1981 [1972]: 106).
8. Here a further remark helps to clarify the theory: the fetish is "the perfect sex object since it substitutes for any real sex, just as the abstraction of the commodity substitutes for any exchange of real goods, just as virtual reality substitutes for the real world and thereby becomes the form of our modern fetishism. A radical fetishism this, since it affects all areas of existence and knowledge. We many say all the new technologies have become our new object of desire (I wouldn't venture to say "perverse" object, as Freud has it … More generally, there's fetishism when there's no longer transference of meaning, no longer any possible metaphor … It's literalness that upsets the operation of the sign" (Baudrillard and Noailles 2007: 16–17).

9. Michael Richards's work was a memorial to the World War II Black pilots of the racially segregated Tuskegee unit. The work, apparently completed in 1999, is of an airman pierced by WWII fighter planes. But perhaps Baudrillard was right to think Richards was still working on it on the morning of September 11 when he was swept away by the very event the work prefigured. "The supreme consecration …" (2005b: 117).
10. "9/11 Phone calls from the Towers," a UK Channel Four TV documentary shown in September 2009, reported many of these messages.
11. As Gary Genosko once wrote: "In symbolic exchanges, signs do burn" (1994: 162).
12. Baudrillard never refers to America here, possibly because he argues that political power was a secondary consideration – "demonstrated unintentionally" when the attack on the White House failed (2003a: 47); he does however when talking about the reaction to the attack, but even here "America is here merely the allegory or universal figure of any power incapable of bearing the spectre of opposition" (2003a: 63).

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