

Articoli/16

Ludicity, intelligence and power **Jean Baudrillard's unfinished project**

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Baudrillard began a final book project in 2004, three years before his death in 2007. Some of the projected chapters were presented at various conferences before his health no longer permitted work or travel. This article gives an account of the work of his final years as he attempted to reorganise his basic theoretical framework.

«C'est ... du côté des êtres les plus étrangers à la volonté, du côté des exilés du dialogue et de la représentation, des exilés du savoir et de l'Histoire, qu'il faut chercher le seul adversaire à la mesure de cette toute-puissance hégémonique»

J. Baudrillard, *L'Agonie de la Puissance*

The final pages of his last volume of *Cool Memories V, 2000-2004*, indicate a major health problem. «Where do you rate pain on a sliding scale from 0 = no pain, 10 = unbearable. It's a bit like plucking daisy petals... they are the petals of pain»¹. On taking medication «with time something vulgar reappears: health, the signs of health. And a certain nostalgia for the state of grace, translucency and powerlessness of the illness»². Baudrillard died in March 2007 after a long illness which severely interrupted his programme of writing from 2006 when he learnt he had terminal cancer. Chris Turner, his principal translator, wrote Baudrillard had reported that towards the end «nothing had ever been so cruel as the cancer drugs that prevented him thinking clearly»³. It is important now to remember that the financial crisis that shook the economies of the world occurred just after his death: he did not live to see it and we were deprived of his

¹ J. Baudrillard, *Cool Memories V, 2000-2004*. Oxford 2006, p.105.

² *Ibid.*, p.112.

³ C. Turner, *Jean Baudrillard: Striking against banality*, «The Drawbridge», 5, 2007.

analysis of it. But before then he had reorganised his theoretical framework to take account of what he saw as a new shift in the balance of global antagonisms.

Apart from the very early writings Baudrillard's books were collections of essays or conference papers collected around a theme – and sometime he had difficulties in finding a final arrangement. But a book would have a theme, a basic issue. It seems that the new book would indeed take up in a more developed form ideas that had been initiated in a short essay in 1996 first published in *Libération*, called *The Global and the Universal*⁴ and extended in a talk given in Auckland, New Zealand, in 2001⁵. The principal theme of the new project would be the antagonism between the universal and the global: globalization he said «seems to be irreversible; the universal on the other hand seems to be disappearing». In the discussion of this thematic in Auckland he included remarks on singularities that were a significant pointer to the way he was thinking: «culture», he said

as a universal form is a figure of exile and of transcendence... the aesthetic and critical charm of European culture came from this virtual quality – at least in the modern period – the exile, physical or mental, of the great creators and the great works from their own societies... culture does not translate the identity of a society, the immanence of a system of values. On the contrary, culture is their transcendence, disavowal, challenge, distance, (the 'pathos of distance' as Nietzsche put it, Nietzsche who declared himself the first great European and who, from the depths of exile, spoke always of this Europe). This is why, whatever one may do, culture remains irreducible and ungraspable – this is what remains of its singularity even at the heart of the universal.⁶

Thus, firstly, fundamental to the framework he was developing from 1996, and which is only in part explored in the *Intelligence of Evil*, are three basic terms: the global, universal, and the singular. Secondly, there is a set of two couplet terms that come to occupy a crucial place from 2004: domination and hegemony, carnivalisation and cannibalisation. Thirdly, all this analysis takes place on the basis of a theory of the emergence of opposition and implosion of virtual reality and integral reality (as explained at length in *The Intelligence of Evil* a book which radically develops the theses of the book of 1990, *La Transparence du Mal*). Here I look at the crisis of his last writings as witness to these late changes he made to his underlying problematic.

I.

What was this new project? It seems that it was in outline a project that was to modify very dramatically key elements of his previous theorising, for the essay *Carnival and Cannibal or the Play of Global Antagonism*⁷ seems to

⁴ J. Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, London 2002, pp. 155-9.

⁵ V. Grace, H. Worth, L. Simmons, (eds), *Baudrillard West of the Dateline*, Palmerston, 2003, pp. 23-36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷ J. Baudrillard, *Carnival and Cannibal*, London 2010.

open a period of crisis in Baudrillard's thinking in his final years. It presents the perspective of a break with the optimistic view that the symbolic cultures of the third world would eventually take their revenge on the semiotic cultures (of the first and second worlds). All of Baudrillard's previous writings were articulated on this struggle between the symbolic (challenge, seduction, evil) and the semiotic (simulation, linearity, accumulation). In the last chapter of his book *The Perfect Crime*⁸ he referred to the story by Borges of the peoples of the Empire trapped behind mirrors – it is, he said, these peoples themselves «who will burst in upon our world» and will not be defeated. «So everywhere, object, children, the dead, images, women, everything which serves to provide a passive reflection in a world based on identity, is ready to go on the counter-offensive»⁹. This idea, however, began to be questioned.

II.

In his writings, and especially his conversation with E. V. Noailles¹⁰, Baudrillard refers again to the short story by Borges called *The Fauna of Mirrors* (from *The Book of Imaginary Beings*). Baudrillard summarizes:

A fantastic fable: the defeated peoples are condemned by the empire to be imprisoned behind mirrors, where they merely reflect the image of their conquerors. But one day they begin to resemble them less and less, and in the end, they pass through to the other side of the mirror and invade the Empire...¹¹.

Baudrillard says in *Carnival and Cannibal* that he has always believed that the symbolic cultures would thus break the mirror and be victorious in their revolt against the semiotic cultures¹². In the conversation with Noailles the story is given wide interpretation as the «whole story of representation» itself. For

representation is a slave condition. To free yourself you have to smash the mirror of representation. Behind every image, behind every representation, behind every concept perhaps, there's a defeated person, someone who's disappeared – but who isn't dead and who's waiting for the point where they'll no longer be a likeness, no longer a mere reflection, and will re-emerge victorious.¹³

Revolt and rebellion is possible in a language which is articulated as a sign system, a semiotics of signifier, signified and referent indeed.

Baudrillard radicalizes this by saying that the current problem is that such a language might be in the process of disappearance 'and the mirror itself

⁸ J. Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, London 1996, pp.148-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.149.

¹⁰ J. Baudrillard, E.V. Noailles, *Exiles from Dialogue*, Cambridge 2007.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.111

¹² J. Baudrillard, *Carnival and Cannibal*, cit., p.28.

¹³ J. Baudrillard, E.V. Noailles, *Exiles*, cit., p.111.

disappear with the appearance of the screen¹⁴. He continues to radicalize: this would be

the end of the interplay between the world and thought, the interplay between the world and language. With the virtual stage of the screen, which eliminates the mirror stage, the world and language disappear simultaneously. What's in danger is this distancing function that belongs to language, this function of distinguishing itself from materiality by way of the concept and yet being a fragment of the world, of the material world, this extraordinary paradoxical conjunction (there being no ascendancy of the one over the other, but a reciprocity between them). With digital and systemic organisation, we're in a *dispositif* that's no longer even representation, but purely operational.¹⁵

And further: this is a new kind of language but with

extremely simple terms, which are no longer signs but ciphers. An inert world that responds to you now only with sterilized information, that is to say information expurgated of any connotation of affect or meaning. From this point on, exchange is really impossible, but this world, the virtual world, no longer asks itself the question of impossible exchange: it has swallowed its own mirror; it has swallowed its own reference; it is its own truth. No transcendence any more, and hence no questioning... and which of course may continue indefinitely, since it is beyond distances, beyond contradictions...¹⁶.

This then is a completely different application of Borges' story from the one given in 1999 where the play of the silent majorities, opting for abstention and ambiguity, is a symbolic game through the «statistical shadows» of opinion polls.¹⁷ For now the peoples are trapped behind screens.

III.

Baudrillard's last phase of writing is not only complex, but also full of basic disillusionment. This is clearly stated in *Carnival and Cannibal* –

if we consider what is really happening in this planetary confrontation, we see that the subjugated peoples, from the depths of their slavery, far from resembling their masters less and less and taking their liberatory revenge, have begun to resemble them more and more, have begun to mimic their model grotesquely, piling on thick the marks of their servitude – which is the other way of taking one's revenge – a fatal strategy which we cannot term victorious since it is lethal for both.¹⁸

Something has indeed happened – and it looks as if Baudrillard has concluded that the extension of American or Western power, through

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.112.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.112-113.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.113.

¹⁷ J. Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, London 2001, p.106.

¹⁸ J. Baudrillard, *Carnival and Cannibal*, cit., pp.10-11.

globalisation, has not only been victorious over the symbolic cultures, but that this has two further consequences. One is a new process by which third world peoples are entrapped as ‘mirror peoples’ of a new Empire. But another is that with the triumph of the semiotic cultures there is a further procession to the elimination of the ‘semiotic’ culture of the sign altogether – and here in the first world is a new and specific entrapment:

With this perfect obedience to the cybernetic command, we’re back precisely at Borges’s fable, but transposed now from mirror to screen. It’s no longer the forced resemblance of the mirror, it’s the total obedience and total virtual jurisdiction of the screen. And to stay with the fable, we might ask what disappears, defeated, behind the screen, like the ‘mirror people’? What, in virtual reality, has succumbed and been condemned to exile (having perhaps, unlike the fable, no chance of re-emerging)? What is assigned, not in this case to resemblance and representation, but to virtuality and spectrality, to immediate presence in real time (on the screens) and unlimited duplication (cloning which is the limitless form or resemblance and of the human in the age of its technical reproducibility, to parody Benjamin!)?

Baudrillard answers these questions thus:

Where this absorption of the human into the virtual screen is concerned you only have to look at...the post office clerks behind their computers. They used to carry on manual, even mental operations. Now, they each have their screen. The discrepancy between the two – the computers and these human beings – is incredible, for they’re still human beings, but they are consigned to virtuality, in the same way as Borges’s peoples are made to resemble their masters. So, to escape becoming mere extensions of the machines and to stay alive, they think up all kinds of things. They put flowers on their terminals. But it’s like weeping over their own graves («elles metrent des fleurs sur leur *computer* – c’est comme de pleurer sur leur tombe».¹⁹

This is not then a simple process of alienation and domination, playing the game of silent majorities.

IV.

It the aftermath of *The Intelligence of Evil* there was then a crisis in his thinking, and all the late texts are witness to his attempt to deal with it. He wrote in 2004 that

to contemplate the idea that a global power... may constitute a power of defiance, a power of response to the challenge from the other world – that is to say, ultimately, a symbolic power – means for me a drastic revision, a casting into the balance of what I have always thought (which has always had the revolt and final victory of Borges’s *Fauna of Mirrors* as its horizon).

¹⁹ J. Baudrillard, E.V. Noailles, *Exiles*, cit., p.115; J. Baudrillard., *The Intelligence of Evil, or the Lucidity Pact*, Oxford, 2005, p.134. J.B. italicized the word computer in English.

There is something new in this situation for we are now «confronted with something irreversible – in what we may just discern today as a worse kind of ultimate prospect»²⁰.

So what does this change of position amount to? Three major consequences are in evidence. The first is that globalisation, the irreversible triumph of American power produces a new situation. It is no longer a form of capitalism. Its space-time formation is non-Euclidean. Going beyond the traditional forms of domination (master-slave dialectic) the new situation is one in which there is no longer an oppositional formation, an alternative culture that might be victorious in struggle against it. He registers this change by introducing the concept of hegemony: global power has attained a hegemonic power in which alternatives to the system, including symbolic ones, are rendered impotent. The epoch of domination, with its promise of triumphant revolution over the ruling order is over: it is irreversible.

The second is that the hegemonic power has attained such confidence of its own position that it comfortably absorbs critique within its own discourse, indeed it radicalises critical discourse in pronouncing it from within power itself. It eliminates evil (it is the Empire of the Good); and thus, given its hegemony, it can itself speak evil. But where does this leave evil and above all the intelligence of evil? There is of course the evil which appears as terrorism (even natural events). But there is also the evil which produces itself stubbornly and even stupidly in the refusal of the unilateral gift. The attempt to usher in a universe without evil is bound to fail; evil inevitably reappears and is the key to understanding the new hegemony. This poses the question: is the basic epistemology of the new position a 'pact' with the intelligence of evil? What is the lucidity pact? Curiously Baudrillard says «In keeping with an implacable reversibility, stupidity lies in wait for it [*intelligence*], as its shadow, as its double. Only thought [*la Pensée*], only lucidity, which stands as much opposed to intelligence as to stupidity (*la Bêtise*), can escape this trial of strength»²¹. The «intelligence of evil» could also be the «unintelligence of evil»²².

Thirdly Baudrillard alters his approach by introducing the terms carnivalisation and masquerade to incorporate the new scenario of simulacra – terms that cannot be found in *The Intelligence of Evil*, and is the mark of the new problematic. This new focus presents Baudrillard's general theory of Western imperialism as a frame for his analysis of globalisation. It is not primarily economics or technology that is at work in a simple process of Western domination. It is a strategy of an 'operational simulation' by which all other cultures are «disneyfied» by a double process of cannibalisation (by the host culture) and carnivalisation (by American cultural hegemony). Hegemony asserts itself «no longer through exporting techniques, values, ideologies but through the universal extrapolation of a parody of these values...Global power is the

²⁰ J. Baudrillard, *Carnival and Cannibal*, cit., p.28.

²¹ J. Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil*, cit., p.177.

²² J. Baudrillard, *Cool Memories*, cit., p.107.

power of the simulacrum»²³. This new frame suddenly unifies the whole of the theory which has been latent in his writings since his 1968 essay on modernity²⁴.

In this new problematic there remained elements of bathos in his thinking: the typewriter, the camera, all the gadgets of digital technology (and some that developed before – the television, the compact disc, the answer machine, the mobile phone). Baudrillard appeared to many readers as a technophobe; as he refused to adapt to the computer and remained steadfastly attached to his typewriter (photos in the article in *Philosophie Magazine*²⁵, show him first in front of his typewriter²⁶, and then in his absence just the typewriter on the desk and the empty chair²⁷). These small gadgets were analysed side by side with epoch making changes – he refers to Günther Anders as the writer who charted this course. For Anders the fundamental event of the Korean War was the fact that General MacArthur's request to use atomic weapons was overruled by Washington on the basis of computer analyses of the consequences. Baudrillard says that this «marks the point where humans definitively renounced their destiny in favour of technological authority and its unquestionable superiority»²⁸. Thus the basic theme of the last phase of writing: the «disqualification of humans in favour of automatism, a massive transfer of decision-making to computerised devices. A symbolic capitulation, a defeat of the will much more serious than any physical impairment. *Sacrificio dell'intelletto, della volontà, dell'immaginazione*»²⁹.

Computerised decision-making is embedded in the hegemonic sphere, its politics, economics and culture.

V.

Considering this whole shift of responsibility to the new technology as a counter-gift led Baudrillard to think of this problematic in quasi-theological and metaphysical forms. If technology, and the orders of simulacra, is thought of as a means for humanity to disappear, it must therefore have had a symbolic element, a fatal strategy component from the beginning. The class struggles, the moment of capital, were only passing episodes in a much more profound process – humanity was perhaps beginning to escape the power of a fundamental debt: that of having been given life and nature. In answering questions from J-F Paillard in 2003 he said:

²³ J. Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power*, (ed) Lotringer, New York 2010, p. 66.; Id., *Carnival and Cannibal*, cit., p. 21.

²⁴ Id., *Modernity*, «*Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*», vol.11, n.3, 1987, pp.63-72.

²⁵ J. Baudrillard, *The Antidote to the Global lies in the Singular*, 2003. (interview, [August 2003], published posthumously, «*Philosophie Magazine*», April 2008, pp.48-53, and trans in «*Cultural Politics*», 2011, vol 9, 3, pp 339-344). ([2003] 2011).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.48.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.49.

²⁸ J. Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power*, cit., p.81.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

we must look to the singular for the antidote to the global. I have to tell you, in fact, that if I weren't convinced that there's something in the human being that fights and resists, I'd quite simply have given up writing. Since in that case, writing would be just tilting at windmills. I'm firmly of the belief that this particular, irreducible element can't be universalized or globalized, that it can't be part of some standard form of exchange. Will human beings do something positive with it one day? We can't say. The issue is by no means decided. And that, in fact, is where I find scope for optimism...³⁰.

It seems that Baudrillard was on the verge of refiguring humanism, a neohumanism finding its roots in the writings of Günther Anders of the 1950s. Perhaps even more fundamentally questioning the silent majorities thesis, and a reclaiming of responsibility in the face of technology?

VI.

This is a new language in Baudrillard. Human beings as fighters against the loss of humanity itself? And how to resist? «To find the only adversary who will face this all-powerful hegemony, we must look for those beings that are strangers to will, exiled from dialogue and representation, exiled from knowledge and history»³¹. What does Baudrillard mean by exiles, exiles from dialogue? In these last essays a number of examples are given, but many of them are already to be found in his previous writings even dating from the 1970s and suddenly making their reappearance in a new problematic. Their general form is that of refusal, rejection of the unilateral gift, refusal of incorporation into the «hegemonic sphere». The new context of the obsolescence of the human³², of the irreversibility of the hegemony of integral reality itself: this is here to stay – but as it constitutes the Empire of Good it harbours within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The new context is also named the epoch of the global, of the project of globalization conceived as the imposition of the machinery of integral reality on all other cultures. This is a technological imposition but it is also a politico-cultural imposition: the «carnivalization of power» – the radical simulation of political democracy, since «this is how America dominates the rest of the world»³³. As the global breaks up only fragments remain, and this «leaves the field free for all singularities: the worst and the best, the most violent and the most poetic»³⁴.

But what are these singularities? And is there a political dimension? «Now you must fight against everything that wants to help you»³⁵. The obsolescence of

³⁰ J. Baudrillard, *The Antidote*, cit., p. 257.

³¹ «C'est... du côté des êtres les plus étrangers à la volonté, du côté des exilés du dialogue et de la représentation, des exilés du savoir et de l'Histoire, qu'il faut chercher le seul adversaire à la mesure de cette toute-puissance hégémonique». Baudrillard's lecture in Baku, April, 2006. Cf. Id., *Les Exilés*, cit., 2015, p.131; english translation, Id., *The Agony of Power*, cit., p.104.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

the human, means the obsolescence of everything human, history, work, desire, the individual, imagination, the other, reality, death³⁶, has to be confronted but in a new way, that is in a way that is different from that of Marx who remained «faithful to the principle of reality» and economics³⁷. Thus this is 'not a historical revolution but a kind of anthropological mutation'³⁸. The logic of the position of counter-hegemony then is not to build a new system, or to displace power with a new power system. It leads to the idea that «power itself must be abolished – and not solely because of a refusal to be dominated, which is at the heart of all traditional struggles – but also, just as violently, in the refusal to dominate»³⁹.

His papers, talks, interviews in this last period therefore present a new tonality, even an optimism within a disillusionment, as new spaces are, paradoxically, opened a the same time as globalism becomes irreversible. Irreversible but vulnerable. There is a

new type of confrontation characterizing the era of Hegemony... it is no longer precisely political but metaphysical and symbolic in the strong sense. It is a confrontation, a divide that exists not only at the heart of the dominant power, but at the heart of our individual existence⁴⁰.

For

There remains the nostalgia cultivated by all heresies over the course of history – the dream, running parallel to the course of the real world, of the absolute event which would open on to a thousand years of happiness. The heightened expectation of the single event that would, at a stroke, unmask the enormous conspiracy in which we are immersed. This expectation is still at the heart of the collective imagination. The Apocalypse is present, in homeopathic doses in each of us.⁴¹

VII.

It does appear then that there was a considerable shift in the late essays towards a new position, but one that was able to draw together ideas and analyses from much earlier works. Some basic features remain in the view that the revolution against capitalism by proletarian movements are not at issue, but now movements against global capitalism or post-capitalism cannot be successful. Nevertheless a counter-power (the mirror peoples) does emerge, even if its aims are not either hegemonic, or incorporative: they are movements of refusal and rejection and rogue events. The key event was the 'rogue' event of 9/11. Baudrillard spent time on this in the new position in his essay Where

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Good Grows ⁴². In this perspective, the Empire of Good, secretes its own counter-terror, and even natural events that disturb the system take on the aura of a kind of natural terrorism. Even the head butt of Zidane is cited. But apart from terrorism, Baudrillard notes all those instances of pure refusal: from Gary Gilmore's refusal of the cancellation of the sentence of execution (already mentioned in *Transparency of Evil*), to the 'no' vote in the referendum on Europe in France and elsewhere and the revolt in the French suburbs. These are refusals, but they are not going anywhere. But perhaps they are an alternative answer to the question: why hasn't everything disappeared?

What is not in evidence in these analyses is any constructive, local or national economic or political community action or social movement. There is nothing on ecology, except tentative indications of a natural counter-terrorist rogue event. There is no reconciliation with digital technology, no attempt to change his long-standing difference with Umberto Eco who argued for ways of dealing critically with the new technology. There are those who work for the internal disruption and collapse of the technology, but he does not see them as antagonists to the system. The true antagonists are the exiles of knowledge, history, dialogue. And it is here that the paradox of Baudrillard's position is evident. His argument that Euclidean space-time has disappeared is simply an effect of his method (the leading edge of modernity is the sole focus of theory). For the Euclidean and non-Euclidean exist side by side, the former is not eclipsed: the universe does not simply implode into total chaos and uncertainty. What is essential in Baudrillard is the focus on this one side of (post-) modernity, uncertainty, in the third and fourth orders of simulacra it is through uncertainty that domination and hegemony are imposed. But in his (Nietzschean) appeal to the exiles of dialogue (humanity) he nevertheless recognises something else.

In reading these late essays today it is important to remember that Baudrillard died in 2007. His writings anticipated no smooth progressive development of modern global systems, but he was certain that a general economic collapse would not be possible in a system of integral reality just as a collapse of the network itself was not possible either even though it was subject to viral attack. These events, rogue or fake, continued to produce effects of uncertainty, but these were characteristic of the deregulation within and produced by neoliberalism itself. As for the aftermath of 9/11 he did not live to see the rise of the caliphate project: it is tempting to suggest that he would have seen this as a capitulation of Islam to the problematic of identity and a change in the character of terrorism, a significant step in the agony of the disappearance of Islam itself.

But what these last essays suggest that there is an underlying humanism in Baudrillard's philosophy that few have noticed. When he wrote «McLuhan saw modern technologies as "extensions of man" [w]e should see them, rather, as "expulsions of man"»⁴³, it was certainly evident that in his whole engagement

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 91-97.

⁴³ J. Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, cit., p.35.

with technology was a witness to a fundamental alienation. Only in the late essays does this underlying position begin fully to emerge in his engagement with neoliberalism. This perhaps is the deepest paradox in Baudrillard's writing: on the one hand the ambivalent acceptance of the energy of fetishism while on the other hand the rejection of and alienation from the technosphere. The problem was, he said in *Passwords*,

At the stage we are at, we do not know whether technology, having reached a point of extreme sophistication, will liberate us from technology itself – the optimistic viewpoint – or whether in fact we are heading for catastrophe. Even though catastrophes, in the dramaturgical sense of the term – that is to say, endings – may, depending on the protagonists, assume happy or unhappy forms⁴⁴.

Surprisingly then, after all the talk of Baudrillard's anti-humanism, there is a final positional statement at the end of *Passwords*:

Thought must play a catastrophic role, must be itself an element of catastrophe, of provocation, in a world that wants absolutely to cleanse everything, to exterminate death and negativity. But it must at the same time remain humanist, concerned for the human, and, to that end, recapture the reversibility of good and evil, of the human and the inhuman⁴⁵.

By the notion of the “inhuman” Baudrillard always included the sphere and the occupants of the Gods.

VIII.

So what might this “Baudrillardian humanism” look like if it were formulated as a theoretical position in its own right? Baudrillard, in fact, does give us enough material to work with⁴⁶ although he also warns that «when it attempts to define itself – precisely by excluding the inhuman – it becomes laughable»⁴⁷. First of all however it is clear that his writing was not based on an essentialist philosophy of humanism for the theory of symbolic exchange deflected that charge, and therefore has never come under attack for being in alignment with existential humanism – the main target of structural theorists from Althusser to Foucault. But, perhaps with the weakening of the importance of the symbolic order in the late writings, some return to humanity and species-being occurs: from Marcel Mauss (the Gift) to Günther Anders (Obsolescence). Secondly he positions the humanist tradition well within the compass of western modernity and Enlightenment with its separations between the human and the inhuman. But, thirdly, he noted a shift, a break between that classical humanism, «based on the qualities of human beings, their natural gifts and virtues, their human

⁴⁴ J. Baudrillard, *Passwords*, London, 2003, p.42.

⁴⁵ J. Baudrillard, p.92.

⁴⁶ J. Baudrillard, *Paroxysm: Interviews with Philippe Petit*, London 1998, p. 96 ff; Id., *The Vital Illusion*. N.Y, 2000, pp.1-30; Id., *Impossible Exchange*, cit., p.36 ff.

⁴⁷ J. Baudrillard, *Fragments. Cool Memories III, 1990-1995*, London 1997, p.109.

essence, together with the right to have freedom and to exercise that freedom»⁴⁸ and contemporary humanism centred on «the prerogatives of an endangered species» in the face of genetic simulation which threatens an «anthropological deregulation and simultaneous deregulation of all the moral, legal and symbolic rules that were those of humanism»⁴⁹. Humanism is both advancing in a new form and on the defensive against itself in face of the consequences of such an advance. At times Baudrillard is optimistic, suggesting a possible transcendence of humanism:

Our modernity is defined by the perspective of humanism and the Enlightenment, but what preceded us is far more immense than that of humanism, and knew nothing of this distinction between the human and the inhuman. The discovery – or rediscovery – of the inhuman, the violence done to the human in the current field of knowledge, seems to me to be more than an opening, a breach through which to explore the inhuman potentialities of man, and to rediscover – who knows? – a possible metamorphosis of the species, other than its artificial survival in technology.⁵⁰

At other times there is no transcendence:

The boundaries between the human and the inhuman are indeed being wiped out. But we are transcending those boundaries not towards the superhuman and the transvaluation of values, but towards the subhuman and a disappearance of the very characteristics symbolic of the species. In the end, Nietzsche is being proved right: the human species, left to itself, can only duplicate or destroy itself.⁵¹

Central then, to his conception of humanity are concepts of the human species (a quasi scientific-philosophical reflection) and an anthropological conception of humanity with characteristics of a species-being. The approach is specifically open, with no attempt to define essential attributes and limits. In fact it is because humanity as no essential purpose or end goal that it has been a successful species. Whereas for Marx these were described in the early writings as the attributes of humanity's species-being as *homo faber* (creator, producer of worlds), for Baudrillard they appear in the late writings and are identified around life, death, humour, artifice, pleasure, imperfection and vulnerability. Yet these are under threat because the «interplay of the human and the inhuman has been halted, the balance between them destroyed. And, though the potential disappearance of the human is indeed a serious matter, the disappearance of the inhuman is every bit as grave». This is because

The specificity of everything that is not a human being, and of everything in human beings which is inhuman, is threatened by an emerging hegemony of the human in its highly modern, highly rational definition. Everywhere we see the desire to annex nature, other races and cultures, to a universal jurisdiction. Everything is

⁴⁸ J. Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, cit., p.36.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp., 36-37.

⁵⁰ J. Baudrillard, *Paroxysm*, cit., p.91.

⁵¹ J. Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, cit., p.35.

assigned its place in a hegemonic evolutionary anthropology, marking the positive triumph of a single-track conception of the human (in its Western definition of course) in the name of the universal, the good, and democracy. Human rights are the engine of this anthropic, anthropocratic thinking today behind which both the human and inhuman proliferate in strict formal contradiction... The other cultures do not make this distinction between the human and the inhuman. We invented it, and we are currently abolishing it – not in a higher synthesis, but by reduction to an undifferentiated technical abstraction, in accordance with the same dizzying prospect of a final solution⁵².

But it is not only the emergence of modern genetic engineering that poses this threat. It is also posed of course in the emergence of the technosphere and especially cybernetics. At one point Baudrillard considers all this in a discussion of artificial intelligence:

What still distinguishes the functioning of human beings from that of machines – even the most ‘intelligent’ machines – is the intoxication of functioning, of living – pleasure. Inventing machines which feel pleasure is a task that is still beyond the powers of humanity... They can only be extensions of human beings – or destroy them... They do not have that ironic surplus of functioning, that pain and suffering, they do not give into narcissistic temptation, and are not even seduced by their own knowledge. Which perhaps explains their deep melancholy, the sadness of computers.⁵³

The most that can happen, he notes, is that some machines will one day «learn to give signs of pleasure»⁵⁴.

This is a new abreactive humanism that is quite different from the human rights egalitarian system of universal values which stems from the classic Revolutions (America, France)⁵⁵. Against the new hegemonic sphere – «can resistance come from humanistic values, the values of the Enlightenment, or else should something more radical be invented? I would for the more radical way»⁵⁶. This remained an unfinished project but one that allows us to see the whole of his writings on modernity and post-modernity in a new light. Not only did Baudrillard reject neoliberalism and the hegemonic sphere, he thought this

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Baudrillard adopted this Freudian term but also modified it: «I push concepts to their limit in order to incite a violent abreaction. I'm not looking for progressive, positive action any more. I'm looking for negative or paradoxical abreaction, in extreme phenomena». Later he said: «Abreaction consists merely in expelling something: you just don't accept it, but you don't fight it either, and you harbour no illusions about the possibility of overcoming it». It is also called a «paradigm». The simple rejection of valuable gift might be defined as a purely stupid act against self-interest, but Baudrillard see such a refusal can «become a source of energy – and a source of hidden truth... We have to let this masquerade, this banality of Evil work at its own derision. This is «the intelligence of Evil». Moreover, in the absence now of an active power of the negative, where could we get energy from today if not from a violent abreaction to this ambient stupidity?». For a rare but very brief comment on Baudrillard as abreactionist.

⁵⁶ R. Smith, D.B. Clarke (eds.), *Jean Baudrillard: From Hyperreality to Disappearance. Uncollected Interviews*, Edinburgh 2015, p. 152.

was in the last resort unsustainable: «In the central solitude of those very people who profit by it [the global, comfortable, imperial civilization], it is unliveable. And all are secretly won over to the forces that will destroy it».⁵⁷

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⁵⁷J. Baudrillard, *Cool Memories*, cit., p. 60.