Baudrillard: A New McLuhan?

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During the 1980s, Jean Baudrillard has been promoted in certain circles as the new McLuhan, as the most advanced theorist of the media and society in the so-called postmodern era.[1] His theory of a new, postmodern society rests on a key assumption that the media, simulations, and what he calls "cyberblitz" constitute a new realm of experience and a new stage of history and type of society. To a large extent, Baudrillard's work consists in rethinking radical social theory and politics in the light of developments of the consumer, media, information, and technological society. Baudrillard's earlier works focus on the construction of the consumer society and how it provides a new world of values, meaning, and activity, and thus inhabit the terrain of Marxism and political economy. From the mid-1970s on, however, reflections on political economy and the consumer society disappear almost completely from his texts, and henceforth simulations and simulacra, media and information, science and new technologies, and implosion and hyperreality become the constituents of a new postmodern world which -- in his theorizing -- obliterate all the boundaries, categories, and values of the previous forms of industrial society while establishing new forms of social organization, thought, and experience.

Among Baudrillard's most provocative theses are his reflections on the role of the media in constituting the postmodern world. Indeed, he provides paradigmatic models of the media as all-powerful and autonomous social forces which produce a wide range of effects.[2] To explicate the development and contours of his positions on the media, I shall follow his reflections from the late 1960s to the present, and sort out what I consider to be his contributions and limitations. I shall also be concerned to delineate the political implications of his media theory and to point to alternative theoretical and political perspectives on the media.

Baudrillard's Postmodern Media Theory

In 1967, Baudrillard wrote a review of Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* in which he claimed that McLuhan's dictum that the "medium is the message" is "the very formula of alienation in a technical society," and he criticized McLuhan for naturalizing that alienation.[3] At this time, he shared the neo-Marxian critique of McLuhan as a technological reductionist and determinist. By the 1970s and 1980s, however, McLuhan's formula eventually became the guiding principle of his own thought.

Baudrillard begins developing his theory of the media in an article "Requiem for the Media" in *Toward a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972). The title is somewhat ironic for Baudrillard is really only beginning to develop a social theory in which the media will play

crucial roles in constituting a new postmodernity. Thus Baudrillard is really writing a requiem here for a 'Marxist theory of the media' arguing: "McLuhan has said, with his usual Canadian-Texan brutalness, that Marx, the spiritual contemporary of the steam engine and railroads, was already obsolete in his lifetime with the appearance of the telegraph. In his candid fashion, he is saying that Marx, in his materialist analysis of production, had virtually circumscribed productive forces as a privileged domain from which language, signs and communication in general found themselves excluded" (CPES, p. 164). Baudrillard's critique of Marx here begins a radical interrogation of and eventual break with Marxism which would culminate in *The Mirror of Production* (1973). Baudrillard begins distancing himself from Marxism in "Requiem for the Media," and in particular attacks Marx's alleged economic reductionism, or "productivism," and the alleged inability of the Marxian theory to conceptualize language, signs, and communication (Habermas at the time was developing a parallel position within Critical Theory).[4]

As an example of the failure of Marxian categories to provide an adequate theory of the media, Baudrillard criticizes the German activist and writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger's media theory and his attempts to develop a socialist strategy for the media.[5] Baudrillard dismisses this effort as a typical Marxian attempt to liberate productive forces from the fetters of productive relations that fails to see that in their very form the mass media of communication "are anti-mediatory and intransitive. They fabricate non communication -- this is what characterizes them, if one agrees to define communication as an exchange, as a reciprocal space of a speech and a response, and thus of a responsibility (not a psychological or moral responsibility, but a personal, mutual correlation in exchange) .... they are what always prevents response, making all processes of exchange impossible (except in the various forms of response simulation, themselves integrated in the transmission process, thus leaving the unilateral nature of the communication intact). This is the real abstraction of the media. And the system of social control and power is rooted in it" (CPES, pp. 169-170).

It is curious that Baudrillard, interpreted by many of his followers as an avant-garde, postmodern media theorist, manifests in this passage both technophobia and a nostalgia for face-to-face conversation which he privileges (as authentic communication) over debased and abstract media communication. Such a position creates a binary dichotomy between "good" face-to-face communication and "bad" media communication, and thus occludes the fact that interpersonal communication can be just as manipulative, distorted, reified, and son on, as media communication (as Ionesco and Habermas, among others, were aware), while ruling out in advance the possibility of "responsible" or "emancipatory" media communication -- a point that I shall return to in conclusion.

In another study in the *Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard noted how the "TV Object" was becoming the center of the household and was serving an essential "proof function" that the owner was a genuine member of the consumer society (CPRES, pp. 53ff.). The accelerating role of the media in contemporary society is for Baudrillard equivalent to THE FALL into the postmodern society of simulations from the modern universe of production. Modernity for Baudrillard is thus the era of production characterized by the rise of industrial capitalism and the hegemony of the bourgeoisie while postmodern society is an era of simulation dominated by signs, codes, and models. Modernity thus centered on the production of things - commodities and products -- while postmodernity is characterized by radical semiurgy, by a

proliferation of signs. Furthermore, following McLuhan, Baudrillard interprets modernity as a process of explosion of commodification, mechanization, technology, and market relations, while postmodern society is the site of an implosion of all boundaries, regions, and distinctions between high and low culture, appearance and reality, and just about every other binary opposition maintained by traditional philosophy and social theory. Furthermore, while modernity could be characterized as a process of increasing differentiation of spheres of life (Max Weber as interpreted by Habermas), postmodernity could be interpreted as a process of de-differentiation and attendent implosion.[6]

The rise of the broadcast media, especially television, is an important constituent of postmodernity for Baudrillard, along with the rapid dissemination of signs and simulacra in every realm of social and everyday life. By the late 1970s, Baudrillard interprets the media as key simulation machines which reproduce images, signs, and codes which constitute an autonomous realm of (hyper)reality and which come to play a key role in everyday life and the obliteration of the social.[7] Baudrillard's analyses of simulations and hyperreality probably constitute his most important contributions to social theory and media critique. During an era when movie actors simulate politics and charlatans simulate TV-religion the category of simulation provides an essential instrument of radical social critique, while the concept of hyperreality is also an extremely useful instrument of social analysis for a media, cybernetic, and information society.

Baudrillard's analyses point to a significant reversal of the relation between representation and reality. Previously, the media were believed to mirror, reflect, or represent reality, whereas now the media are coming to constitute a (hyper)reality, a new media reality -- "more real than real" -- where "the real" is subordinate to representation leading to an ultimate dissolving of the real. In addition, in "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media," Baudrillard claims that the proliferation of signs and information in the media obliterates meaning through neutralizing and dissolving all content -- a process which leads both to a collapse of meaning and the destruction of distinctions between media and reality. In a society supposedly saturated with media messages, information and meaning "implode," collapsing into meaningless "noise," pure effect without content or meaning. Thus, for Baudrillard: "information is directly destructive of meaning and signification, or neutralizes it. The loss of meaning is directly linked to the dissolving and dissuasive action of information, the media, and the mass media.... Information devours its own contents; it devours communication and the social.... information dissolves meaning and the social into a sort of nebulous state leading not at all to a surfeit of innovation but to the very contrary, to total entropy" (SSM, pp. 96-100).

Baudrillard uses here a model of the media as a black hole of signs and information which absorb all contents into cybernetic noise which no longer communicates meaningful messages in a process of implosion where all content implodes into form. We thus see here how Baudrillard eventually adopts McLuhan's media theory as his own, claiming that: "the medium is the message signifies not only the end of the message, but also the end of the medium. There are no longer media in the literal sense of the term (I am talking above all about the electronic mass media) -- that is to say, a power mediating between one reality and another, between one state of the real and another -- neither in content nor in form. Strictly speaking this is what implosion signifies: the absorption of one pole into another, the short-circuit between poles of every

differential system of meaning, the effacement of terms and of distinct oppositions, and thus that of the medium and the real. Hence the impossibility of any mediation, of any dialectical intervention between the two or from one to the other, circularity of all media effects. Hence the impossibility of a sense (meaning), in the literal sense of a unilateral vector which leads from one pole to another. This critical -- but original -- situation must be thought through to the very end; it is the only one we are left with. It is useless to dream of a revolution through content or through form, since the medium and the real are now in a single nebulous state whose truth is undecipherable" (SSM, pp. 102-103).

In effect, Baudrillard is suggesting that the very project of developing a radical theory of the media is impossible because there really are no "media" in the sense of institutions and cultural machines mediating between dominant political and economic powers and the population below. He claims that the media and "reality" implode such that it is impossible to distinguish between media representations and the "reality" which they supposedly represent. Baudrillard also suggests that the media intensify massification by producing mass audiences and massification of ideas and experience. On the other hand, he claims that the masses absorb all media content, neutralize, or even resist, meaning, and demand and obtain more spectacle and entertainment, thus further eroding the boundary between media and "the real." In this sense, the media implode into the masses to an extent that it is unknowable what effects the media have on the masses and how the masses process the media.

Consequently, on this view, the media pander to the masses, reproducing their taste, their interest in spectacle and entertainment, their fantasies and way of life, producing an implosion between mass consciousness and media phantasmagoria. In this way, Baudrillard shortcircuits the manipulation theory which sees media manipulation imposed from above producing mass consciousness, yet he seems to share the contempt for the masses in standard manipulation theory claiming that they want nothing more than spectacle, diversion, entertainment and escape, and are incapable of, or uninterested in, producing meaning.

In any case, since the media and the masses liquidate meaning, it is meaningless to carry out ideological critiques of media messages since the "medium is the message" in the sense that media communication has no significant referents except its own images and noise which ceaselessly refer back and forth to other media images and spectacles. In *On Seduction* (1979), Baudrillard utilizes McLuhan's distinction between "hot" and "cool" media to describe the ways that media devour information and exterminate meaning. According to Baudrillard, the media take "hot" events like sports, wars, political turmoil, catastrophes, etc. and transform them into "cool" media events, which he interprets as altogether another kind of event and experience. Concerning the difference between a televised and attended sports event, Baudrillard writes: "Do not believe that it is a matter of the same game: one is hot, the other is cool -- one is a contest where affect, challenge, mise en scene, and spectacle are present, whereas the other is tactile, modulated (visions in flash-back, replays, close-ups or overhead views, various angles, etc.): a televised sports event is above all a televised event, just as _Holocaust_ or the Vietnam war are televised events of which one can hardly make distinctions" (SED, p. 217).

For Baudrillard, eventually, all the dominant media become "cool," erasing McLuhan's (problematical) distinction between hot and cool media. That is, for Baudrillard all the media of

information and communication neutralize meaning and involve the audience in a flat, one-dimensional media experience which he defines in terms of a passive absorption of images, or a resistance of meaning, rather than the active processing or production of meaning. The electronic media therefore on this account have nothing to do with myth, image, history, or the construction of meaning (or ideology). Television is interpreted instead as a media "which suggests nothing, which magnetises, which is only a screen, or is rather a miniaturized terminal which in fact is found immediately in your head -- you are the screen and the television is watching you. Television transistorizes all neurons and operates as a magnetic tape -- a tape not an image" (SED, p. 220).

Baudrillard, McLuhan and the Ecstasy of Communication

 We see here how Baudrillard out-McLuhans McLuhan in interpreting television, and all other media, simply as technological forms, as machines which produce primarily technological effects in which content and messages, or social uses, are deemed irrelevant and unimportant. We also see how, like McLuhan, he anthropomorphizes the media ("the television is watching you"), a form of technological mysticism (or to be more nasty, mystification) as extreme as McLuhan. Like McLuhan, Baudrillard also globalizes media effects making the media demiurges of a new type of society and new type of experience.

 Baudrillard also practices McLuhan's method of probes and mosaic constellations of images and concepts which take on an experimental and provisional nature. Consequently, whereas he sets forth theoretically articulated theses about the media in "Requiem," in his studies of simulations and later writings he tends to cluster images, concepts, and descriptive analyses, within which media often play a key role, rather than systematically articulating a well-defined theoretical position, thus adopting a key McLuhanite literary strategy.

 Yet we might contrast here McLuhan's ecumenical Catholicism with Baudrillard's somewhat puritanical Protestantism.[8] McLuhan fantasized a new type of global community and even a new universal (media) consciousness and experience through the dissemination of a global media system, the global village. McLuhan also believed that the media could overcome alienation produced by the abstract rationality of book culture which was being replaced by a new synaesthesia and harmonizing of the mind and body, the senses and technologies. Baudrillard by contrast sees the media as external demigods, or idols of the mind -- to continue the Protestant metaphor --, which seduce and fascinate the subject and which enter subjectivity to produce a reified consciousness and privatized and fragmented life-style (Sartre's seriality). Thus while McLuhan ascribes a generally benign social destiny to the media, for Baudrillard the function of TV and mass media is to prevent response, to isolate and privatize individuals, and to trap them into a universe of simulacra where it is impossible to distinguish between the spectacle and the real, and where individuals come to prefer spectacle over "reality" (which both loses interest for the masses and its privileged status in philosophy and social theory).

 The mass media are thus instruments for Baudrillard of a "cold seduction" whose narcissistic charm consists of a manipulative self-seduction in which we enjoy the play of lights, shadows, dots, and events in our own mind as we change channels or media and plug into the variety of networks -- media, computer, information -- that surround us and that allow us to become

modulators and controllers of an overwhelming panoply of sights, sounds, information, and events. In this sense, media have a chilling effect (which is why Baudrillard allows McLuhan's "cool" to become downright "cold") which freeze individuals into functioning as terminals of media and communication networks who become involved as part and parcel of the very apparatus of communication. The subject, then, becomes transformed into an object as part of a nexus of information and communication networks.

The interiorization of media transmissions within the screen of our mind obliterates, he claims, the distinction between public and private, interior and exterior space -- both of which are replaced by media space. Here Baudrillard inverts McLuhan's thesis concerning the media as extensions of the human, as exteriorizations of human powers, and argues instead that humans internalize media and thus becomes terminals within media systems -- a new theoretical anti-humanism that might amuse Louis Althusser. The eye and the brain, on this model, replaces both the other sense organs and the hand as key instruments of human practice, as information processing replaces human practice and techne and poesis alike.[9]

In "The Ecstasy of Communication" Baudrillard describes the media as instruments of obscenity, transparency, and ecstasy -- in special sense of these terms.[10] He claims that in the postmodern mediascape, the domestic scene -- or the private sphere per se -- with its rules, rituals, and privacy is exteriorized, or made explicit and transparent, "in a sort of obscenity where the most intimate processes of our life become the virtual feeding ground of the media (the Loud family in the United States, the innumerable slices of peasant or patriarchal life on French television). Inversely, the entire universe comes to unfold arbitrarily on your domestic screen (all the useless information that comes to you from the entire world, like a microscopic pornography of the universe, useless, excessive, just like the sexual close-up in a porno film): all this explodes the scene formerly preserved by the minimal separation of public and private, the scene that was played out in a restricted space" (p. 130).

In addition, the spectacles of the consumer society and the dramas of the public sphere are also being replaced by media events that replace public life and scenes with a screen that shows us everything instantaneously and without scruple or hesitation: "Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all becomes transparence and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication" (p. 130). The ecstasy of communication: everything is explicit, ecstatic (out of or beyond itself), and obscene in its transparency, detail, and visibility: "It is no longer the traditional obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, forbidden or obscure; on the contrary, it is the obscenity of the visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-visible. It is the obscenity of what no longer has any secret, of what dissolves completely in information and communication" (p. 131). One thinks here of such 1987 media obscenity concerning the trials and tribulations of Gary Hart and Donna Rice, of Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, of Ron and Nancy Reagans' cancer operations and astrology games, or the dirty business deals of his associates, and the dirty political deals of Iran/Contra -- all of which have been exposed to the glaring scrutiny of the media in which what used to be private, hidden, and invisible suddenly becomes (almost) fully explicit and visible.

In the ecstasy of communication everything becomes transparent, and there are no more secrets,

scenes, privacy, depth or hidden meaning. Instead a promiscuity of information and communication unfolds in which the media circulate and disseminate a teeming network of cool, seductive and fascinating sights and sounds to be played on one's own screen and terminal. With the disappearence of exciting scenes (in the home, in the public sphere), passion evaporates in personal and social relations, yet a new fascination emerges ("the scene excites us, the obscene fascinates us") with the very universe of media and communication. In this universe we enter a new form of subjectivity where we become saturated with information, images, events, and ecstasies. Without defense or distance, we become "a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence" (p. 133). In the media society, the era of interiority, subjectivity, meaning, privacy, and the inner life is over; a new era of obscenity, fascination, vertigo, instantaneity, transparency and overexposure begins: Welcome to the postmodern world!

In his more recent 1980 writings which I have not examined here -- and which tend to recycle (i.e. simulate) his earlier positions -- Baudrillard continues to call attention to McLuhan as the great media theorist of our epoch and continues to subscribe to the postions that I explicated above, though occasionally he notes that one should even go further than he has so far in denying that the media are producers of meaning, or that media content or apparatus is important.[11]

Three Subordinations

Undoubtedly, the media are playing an ever greater role in our personal and social lives, and have dramatically transformed our economy, polity, and society in ways that we are only now becoming aware of. Living within a great transformation, perhaps as significant as the transformation from feudalism to industrial capitalism, we are engaged in a process of dramatic mutation, which we are barely beginning to understand, as we enter the brave new world of media saturation, computerization, new technologies, and new discourses. Baudrillard's contribution lies in his calling attention to these novelties and transformations and providing new concepts and theories to understand them.

Yet doubts remain as to whether the media are having quite the impact that Baudrillard ascribes to them and whether his theory provides adequate concepts to analyze the complex interactions between media, culture, and society today. In this section, I shall suggest that Baudrillard's media theory is vitiated by three subordinations which undermine its theoretical and political usefulness and which raise questions as well about the status of postmodern social theory. I shall suggest that the limitations in Baudrillard's theory can be related to his uncritical assumption of certain positions within McLuhan's media theory and that therefore earlier critiques of McLuhan can accurately and usefully be applied to Baudrillard. This critique will suggest that indeed Baudrillard is a "new McLuhan" who has repackaged McLuhan into new postmodern cultural capital.

First, in what might be called a formalist subordination, Baudrillard, like McLuhan, privileges the form of media technology over what might be called the media apparatus, and thus subordinates content, meaning, and the use of media to its purely formal structure and effects. Baudrillard -- much more so than McLuhan who at least gives some media history and analysis of the media environment -- tends to abstract media form and effects from the media environment and thus erases political economy, media production, and media environment (i.e.

society as large) from his theory. Against abstracting media form and effects from context, I would argue that the use and effects of media should be carefully examined and evaluated in terms of specific contexts. Distinctions between context and use, form and content, media and reality, all dissolve, however, in Baudrillard's one-dimensional theory where global theses and glib pronouncements replace careful analysis and critique.

 Baudrillard might retort that it is the media themselves which abstract from the concreteness of everyday, social, and political life and provide abstract simulacra of actual events which themselves become more real than "the real" which they supposedly represent. Yet even if this is so, media analysis should attempt to recontextualize media images and simulacra rather than merely focusing on the surface of media form. Furthermore, instead of operating with a model of (formal) media effects, I would argue that it is preferable to operate with a dialectical perspective which posits multiple roles and functions to television and other media.

 Another problem is that Baudrillard's formalism vitates the project of ideology critique, and against his claims that media content are irrelevant and unimportant, I would propose grasping the dialectic of form and content in media communication, seeing how media forms constitute content and how content is always formed or structured, while forms themselves can be ideological, as when the situation comedy form of conflict/resolution projects an ideological vision which shows all problems easily capable of being resolved within the existing society, or when action-adventure series formats of violent conflict as the essence of reality project a conservative view of human life as a battleground where only the fittest survive and prosper.[12] For a dialectical theory of the media, television would have multiple functions (and potential decodings) where sometimes the ideological effects may be predominant while at other times time functions a medium like television functions as mere noise or through the merely formal effects which Baudrillard puts at the center of his analysis.

 Consequently, there is no real theory or practice of cultural interpretation in Baudrillard's media (increasingly anti-)theory, which also emanates an anti-hermeneutical bias that denies the importance of content and is against interpretation.[13] This brings us to a second subordination in Baudrillard's theory in which a more dialectical position is subordinated to media essentialism and technological determinism. For -- according to Baudrillard -- it is the technology of, say, television that determines its effects (one-way transmission, semiurgy, implosion, extermination of meaning and the social) rather than any particular content or message (i.e. for both Baudrillard and McLuhan "the media is the message"), or its construction or use within specific social systems. For Baudrillard, media technology and semiurgy are the demiurges of media practices and effects, separated from their uses by specific economic and political interests, individuals and groups, and the social systems within which they function. Baudrillard thus abstracts media from social systems and essentializes media technology as dominant social forces. Yet against Baudrillard, one could argue that capital continues to be a primary determinant of media form and content in neo-capitalist societies just as state socialism helps determine the form, nature, and effects of technologies in certain state socialist societies.

 Baudrillard, like McLuhan, often makes essentializing distinctions between media like television or film, ascribing a particular essence to one, and an opposed essence to the other. Yet it seems highly problematical to reduce apparatuses as complex, contradictory, and many-sided

as television (or film or any mass medium) to its formal properties and effects, or to a technological essence. It is therefore preferable, for theories of media in the capitalist societies, to see the media as syntheses of technology and capital, as technologies which serve specific interests and which have specific political and economic effects (rather than merely technological ones). It is also preferable to see the dialectic between media and society in specific historical conjunctures, to see how social content, trends, and imperatives help constitute the media which in turn influence social developments and help constitute social reality.

For Baudrillard, by contrast, the media today simply constitute a simulated, hyperreal, and obscene (in his technical sense) world(view), and a dialectic of media and society is shortcircuited in a new version of technological determinism. The political implications of this analysis are that constituting alternative media, or alternative uses or forms of existing media, is useless or worse because media in their very essence for him militate against emancipatory politics or any project of social transformation. Such cynical views, however, primarily benefit conservative interests who presently control the media in their own interests -- a point to which I shall soon return.

Thirdly, there is a subordination of cultural interpretation and politics in Baudrillard to what might very loosely be called "theory" -- thus constituting a theoricist subordination in Baudrillard. In other words, just as Louis Althusser subordinated concrete empirical and historical analysis to what he called "theoretical practice" -- and thus was criticized for "theoreticism," -- Baudrillard also rarely engages in close analysis or readings of media texts, and instead simply engages in rather abstract theoretical ruminations. Here, his arm-chair or TV screen theorizing might be compared with Foucault's archival theorizing, or to more detailed and systematic media theory and critique, much to, I'm afraid, Baudrillard's detriment.

Baudrillard also rigorously avoids the messy but important terrain of cultural and media politics. There is nothing concerning alternative media practices, for instance, in his theorizing, which he seems to rule out in advance because on his view all media are mere producers of noise, non-communication, the extermination of meaning, implosion, and so on. In "Requiem for the Media," Baudrillard explicitly argues that all mass media communication falls prey to "mass mediatization," that is "the imposition of models": "In fact, the essential Medium is the Model. What is mediatized is not what comes off the daily press, out of the tube, or on the radio: it is what is reinterpreted by the sign form, articulated into models, and administered by the code (just as the commodity is not what is produced industrially, but what is mediatized by the exchange value system of abstraction)" (CPES, pp. 175-176).

All "subversive communication," then, for Baudrillard has to surpass the codes and models of media communication -- and thus of the mass media themselves which invariably translate all contents and messages into their codes. Consequently, not only general elections but general strikes have "become a schematic reducing agent" (CPES, p. 176). In this (original) situation: "The real revolutionary media during May {1968} were the walls and their speech, the silk-screen posters and the hand-painted notices, the street where speech began and was exchanged - everything that was an immediate inscription, given and returned, spoken and answered, mobile in the same space and time, reciprocal and antagonistic. The street is, in this sense, the alternative and subversive form of the mass media, since it isn't, like the latter, an objectified support for

answerless messages, a transmission system at a distance. It is the frayed space of the symbolic exchange of speech -- ephemeral, mortal: a speech that is not reflected on the Platonic screen of the media. Institutionalized by reproduction, reduced to a spectacle, this speech is expiring" (CPES, pp. 176-177).

In this text, Baudrillard conflates all previously revolutionary strategies and models of "subversive communication" to "schematic reducing agents" and manifests here once again a nostalgia for direct, unmediated, and reciprocal speech ("symbolic exchange") which is denied in the media society. Haunted by a disappearing metaphysics of presence, Baudrillard valorizes immediate communication over mediated communication thus forgetting that all communication is mediated (through language, through signs, through codes, etc.). Furthermore, he romanticizes a certain form of communication (speech in the streets) as the only genuinely subversive or revolutionary communication and media. Consistently with this theory, he thus calls for a (neo-Luddite) "deconstruction" of the media "as systems of non-communication," and thus for the "liquidation of the existing functional and technical structure of the media" (CPES, p. 177).

Against Baudrillard's utopia of immediate speech -- which he himself abandons in his 1980s writings--, I would defend the project of structural and technical refunctioning of the media as suggested earlier by Brecht, Benjamin, and Enzensberger. Baudrillard, by contrast, not only attacks all form of media communication as non-revolutionary, but eventually, by the late 1970s, he surrenders his commitment to revolutionary theory and drops the notion of revolutionary communication or subversive cultural practices altogether.[14] Moreover, Baudrillard becomes a bit testy and even nasty in his later writing when considering alternative media. In a symptomatic passage in "The Ecstasy of Communication," Baudrillard writes:

> the promiscuity {note the moralizing coding here -- D.K.} that reigns over the communication networks is one of superficial saturation, of an incessant solicitation, of an extermination of interstitial and protective spaces. I pick up my telephone receiver and it's all there; the whole marginal network catches and harasses me with the insupportable good faith of everything that wants and claims to communicate. Free radio: it speaks, it sings, it expresses itself. Very well, it is the sympathetic obscenity of its content. In terms a little different for each medium, this is the result: a space, that of the FM band, is found to be saturated,... Speech is free perhaps, but I am less free than before: I no longer succeed in knowing what I want, the space is so saturated, the pressure so great from all who want to make themselves heard.

> I fall into the negative ecstasy of the radio (pp. 131-132).

Against this snide and glib put-down of alternative media, I would argue that alternative television-radio-film provide the possibility of another type of media with different forms, content, goals, and effects from mainstream media.[15] A radical media project would thus attempt to transform both the form and the content of the media, as well as their organization and social functions. In a socialist society, mass media would be part of a communal public sphere and alternative media would be made accessible to all groups and individuals who wished to participate in media communication. This would presuppose dramatic expansion of media access and thus of media systems which would require more channels, technology, and a social commitment to democratic communication.

To preserve its autonomy, such systems should be state funded but not controlled -- much like television in several European countries.[16] It would also have to function as the better local public access systems now do in the United States in which a certain number of channels are put aside for public use and available to everyone on a non-discriminatory basis. In Austin, Texas, for instance, we now have a multi-channel access system with two channels reserved for city government, one city educational channel for use by the Austin school system, one for regularly scheduled weekly access shows by groups committed to public access television, and two channels open to anyone for any use whatsover (these two channels are currently dominated by religious, musical, and sports programming). So far this system has proved functional, allowing just about any individual or group the opportunity to make and broadcast their own programming and statements.

An alternative media system would thus provide the possibility for oppositional, counterhegemonic subcultures and groups to produce programs expressing their own views, oppositions, and struggles that resist the massification, homogenization, and passivity that Baudrillard and others attribute to the media. Alternative media allow marginal and oppositional voices to contest the view of the world, values, and life-styles of the mainstream, and make possible the circulation and growth of alternative subcultures and communities. Baudrillard's theoreticism, however, completely eschews cultural practice and becomes more and more divorced from the political struggles and issues of the day -- though the question of Baudrillard's politics would take another long and very tortured paper to deal with. Reflecting briefly on Baudrillard's media theory leads me to three provisional conclusions:

1) Postmodern media theory is rather impoverished qua media theory and reproduces the limitations of McLuhan's media theory: formalism, technological determinism, and essentialism. John Fekete's critique of McLuhan might profitably be applied to Baudrillard, as might some of the other criticisms of McLuhan once in fashion which may need to be recycled a second time for the new McLuhan(cy).[17] The theory of autonomous media also return with Baudrillard; thus the critiques of autonomous technology can usefully and relevantly be applied to Baudrillard, and, more generally to postmodern social theory.[18]

2) The very weakness of postmodern media theory raises fundamental questions about the status of postmodern social theory itself. The question arises as to whether an implosive theory -like Baudrillard's -- that denies all the boundaries of previous social theory is in a position to carefully and rigorously work out the complex relations and contradictions between the media, economy, state, culture and society, or whether -- as I believe -- neo-Marxian theories of dialectics and mediations are preferable.

3) So I conclude that more sustained critical focus on Baudrillard's theory of the media (as well as all of his other theories) is necessary -- as opposed to the celebatory adultation which has so far -- at least in some circles -surrounded the emergence of a New Master Discourse. If the Baudrillardian postmodern theory is inadequate, then we need new theories to illuminate the multi-faceted and significant roles of the media in contemporary capitalist societies. No such theory exists -- which is part of the attraction of Baudrillard who at least tries to offer a new media theory adequate to its object -and the production of one is perhaps Baudrillard's real

challenge to us.

Notes

1. This polemic draws on material from my forthcoming book _Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond_ (Polity Press, 1989). I am grateful to Arthur Kroker for penetrating critical remarks on an earlier version of this text, to Steve Best for incisive critiques of several versions of the text, and to Peter Bruck who proposed expansion of the political implications of my critique. In this paper, I shall use the following abbreviations in the text for Baudrillard's work: CPES=_Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign_ (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1978); SSM=_In the Shadows of the Silent Majorities_ (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983); SIM= _Simulations_ (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983); and SED=_De la seduction_ (Paris: Galilee, 1979).

2. Baudrillard presents a rather extreme variant of a negative model of the media which sees mass media and culture simply as instruments of domination, manipulation, and social control in which radical intervention and radical media or cultural politics are impossible. Baudrillard thus shares a certain theoretical terrain on theories of the media with the Frankfurt school, many Althusserians and other French radicals, and those who see electronic media, broadcasting, and mass culture simply as a terrain of domination. For my critique of the Frankfurt school media theory, see _Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity_ (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

3. Baudrillard, Review of _Understanding Media_ in _L'Homme et la Societe_, Nr. 5 (1967), pp. 227ff.

4. See Jurgen Habermas, _Theory and Practice_ (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), and the critique in Rick Roderick, _Habermas and the Foundations of Critical Theory_ (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

5. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," in _The Consciousness Industry_ _New York: Seabury_, 1974.

6. See Marshall McLuhan, _Understanding Media_ (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984). Scott Lash proposes use of the term "de-differentiation" in "Discourse or Figure? Postmodernism as a 'Regime of Signification,'" _Theory, Culture & Society_, Vol. 5, Nrs. 2-3 (June 1988).

7. Douglas Kellner, "Boundaries and Borderlines: Reflections on Baudrillard and Critical Theory," _Current Perspectives in Social Theory_ (forthcoming 1988).

8. On McLuhan's catholicism, see John Fekete, "McLuhancy: Counterrevolution in Cultural Theory" (Telos 15, Spring 1973), pp. 75 123 and Arthur Kroker, _Technology and the Canadian Mind_ (Montreal: New World Press, 1984).

9. Fekete, ibid, pp. 100ff.

10. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in Hal Foster, editor, _The Anti-

Aesthetic_ (Port Washington, N.Y.: 1983). Page references from this source will be inserted in the text.

11. Kellner, _Jean Baudrillard_, Ibid.

12. For further elaboration, see Douglas Kellner, "TV, Ideology and Emancipatory Popular Culture," _Socialist Review_ 42 (Nov-Dec 1979), pp. 13-53 and "Television Images, Codes, and Messages," _Televisions_, Vol. 7, No. 4 (1980), pp. 2-19.

13. See Steven Best and Douglas Kellner "(Re)Watching Television: Notes Toward a Political Criticism," _Diacritics_ (Summer 1987), pp. 97-113 for elaboration of the project of developing a political hermeneutics against postmodernist (mostly formalist and anti-hermeneutical) modes of criticism.

14. Kellner, _Jean Baudrillard_, Ibid.

15. This argument is elaborated in Douglas Kellner, "Public Access Television: _Alternative Views_," _Radical Science Journal_ 16, _Making Waves_ (1985), pp. 79-92, and Steve Best and Douglas Kellner, "Watching Television: The Limitations of Post-Modernism," _Science as Culture_ 4 (forthcoming 1988). I point to some of the limitations in Baudrillard's media theory for analysis of contemporary politics in "Baudrillard, Semiurgy and Death" _Theory, Culture & Society_, Vol. IV (1987), pp. 125-146.

16. I shall develop this position in my forthcoming book _Television, Politics and Society: Towards a Critical Theory of Television_ (forthcoming Westview Press).

17. Fekete, Ibid.

18. See Langdon Winner, _Autonomous Technology_ (Cambridge, Mass: The M.I.T. Press, 1977).