

**Boundaries and Borderlines:  
Reflections on Jean Baudrillard and Critical Theory**

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Both New French Theory and Critical Theory explode the boundaries established in the division of labor which separates our academic disciplines into such things as economics, political science, philosophy, sociology, etc. Both claim that there are epistemological and metaphysical problems with abstracting from the interconnectedness of phenomena in the world, or from our experience of it. On this view, philosophy, for example, that abstracts from sociology and economics, or political science that excludes, say, economics or culture from its conceptual boundaries, is by nature one-sided, limited, and flawed. Both Critical Theory and New French Theory therefore transgress established disciplinary boundaries and create new disciplines, theories, and discourses that avoid the deficiencies of the traditional academic division of labor.

From the beginning to the present, Critical Theory has refused to locate itself within any arbitrary or conventional academic domains. It thus traverses and undermines boundaries between competing disciplines, and stresses interconnections between philosophy, economics and politics, and culture and society. Critical Theory established itself in the 1930s as a collective supra-disciplinary synthesis of philosophy, the social sciences, and politics, in which critical social theory would be produced by groups of intellectuals and activists from various disciplines working together to produce a Critical Theory of the present age aiming at radical socio-political transformation.

Note that I said supra-disciplinary and not "interdisciplinary." The Critical Theory project initially involved attempts of individuals from various disciplines working together collectively to develop a historical and systematic theory of contemporary society rather than just bringing individuals from separate disciplines together to chat, or assigning various specialists different topics for research and inquiry. As Leo Lowenthal (1980, p. 109) put it: the term "interdisciplinary work" simply "means nothing more than to leave the disciplines as they are while developing certain techniques which foster a kind of acquaintance between them without forcing them to give up their self-sufficiency or individual claims." Critical Theory, on the contrary, criticized the validity claims of the separate disciplines and attempted to create a new kind of critical social theory.

*Boundary Subversion and the Dialectics of Abstraction*

Max Horkheimer (1972) and Herbert Marcuse (1968) in their programmatic 1930s essays, which distinguished Critical Theory from traditional theory and philosophy, attacked the abstraction involved in drawing boundaries between various disciplines. For Critical Theory economics play a constitutive role in all social processes so that it would be impossible concretely to discuss politics without discussing economics, just as one can not really adequately discuss economics without discussing the role of politics and culture in constituting the economy. Critical Theory is

thus, among other things, a critique of the boundaries between disciplines, and a theory of the mediations (or interconnections) which connect and integrate various modes and dimensions of social reality into a social system or "society."

In contrast to our academic division of labor, Critical Theory, therefore, maps relationships between domains of social reality usually separated by specific academic disciplines. Dividing social reality into specialized spheres of inquiry reproduces the division of labor typical of contemporary modern societies, while intensifying tendencies towards increased professionalization, specialization, and fragmentation. It also mystifies social reality, excludes constitutive factors from discussion, and abstracts from significant social conflicts, problems, complexities, etc., thus occluding social reality and excluding important factors from analysis.

In particular, Critical Theory subverted the established boundary between philosophy and social theory, and strove -- not always successfully -- to overcome the division between theory and politics. For the Critical Theorists, social theory needed the totalizing, integrative, systematizing and critical impulses associated with Hegelian Marxism, as well as the close empirical contact with various domains of social reality that the sciences at least putatively provided. It demanded a rethinking of both philosophy and social theory, for in Adorno's and Horkheimer's (1972, p. xv) words: "That the hygienic shop-floor and everything that goes with it, the Volkswagen or the sportsdrome, leads to an insensitive liquidation of metaphysics, would be irrelevant; but that in the social whole they themselves become a metaphysics, an ideological curtain behind which the real evil is concentrated is not irrelevant."

Since contemporary capitalism was producing in effect a new metaphysics and new ideology, philosophical critique defined as the critique of ideology became an integral part of its social theory. In this context, it is relevant to note that one of the generally overlooked functions of ideology is to draw false boundaries within such domains as sex, race, and class, so as to construct ideological divisions between men and women, the "better classes" and "the lower classes," whites and peoples of color, etc. Ideology constructs divisions between proper and improper behavior, while constructing a hierarchy within each of these domains which justifies the domination of one sex, race, and class over others by virtue of its alleged superiority, or the natural order of things. For example, women are said to be by nature passive, domestic, submissive, etc., and their proper domain is thus deemed to be the private sphere, the home, while the public sphere was reserved for, allegedly, more active, rational, and domineering men.

In these ideological operations we see abstraction at work: ideologies which legitimate the superiority of men over women, or of capitalism over other social systems, so as to attempt to justify the privileges of the ruling classes or strata, -- such patriarchal capitalist ideologies abstract from the injustices, inequities, and suffering produced by patriarchal capitalism, such as the glaring inequities of power and wealth within a supposedly egalitarian society. Thus I believe that abstraction is fundamentally related to the key features of ideology such as legitimation, domination, and mystification, and that the drawing of boundaries (between allegedly inferior and superior systems, groups, policies, values, etc.) also plays a fundamental role in this process.[1] Boundary maintenance (between men and women, capitalists and workers, whites and non-whites, Americans and the rest of the world, capitalism and communism, etc. etc.) serves the interests of social domination, as well as the functions of legitimation and

mystification of social reality. Thus I am proposing that the "distortion," "mystification," "masking," and other occluding functions usually associated with ideology are related to a certain sort of abstraction and to a specific type of ideological boundaries.

Philosophy too has established itself as a discipline which specializes in drawing boundaries and in abstraction, and the history of philosophy can be read as a history of its boundaries and abstractions. Until recent challenges from Germany and France, the discourse of philosophy was structured by binary thinking which drew fundamental metaphysical boundaries between subject and object, mind and body, nature and culture, humans and God, the individual and society, reason and passion, speech and writing, etc. in which one factor was usually privileged over the other (Derrida 1976). Both Critical Theory and New French Theory (i.e. Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard, Lyotard, and others) attacked the reifications involved in these boundaries, the illegitimate hierarchies in a bifurcational metaphysical tradition which inevitably privileged one metaphysical term over another, and their ideological functions. Both Critical Theory and New French Theory therefore carry through a critique of abstractions, reifications, and ideology which traces reified categories and boundaries back to their social origins and which criticizes the distortions, mystifications, and falsifications therein.

For example, there are interesting similarities between the critique of idealism in Critical Theory and the critique of metaphysics in New French Theory. Critical Theory, criticizes concepts like Geist, spirit, mind, etc. which are taken by idealism to be a primary reality that grasp the essence of "the real," and which are thus a primordial metaphysical foundation and finality. For Critical Theory, there is a non-identity between concept and object, between mind and world, and the concepts of idealism are deemed to be abstractions which are themselves the product of mental and social labor. New French Theory, like Derrida's deconstruction, likewise subverts metaphysics by undermining the claims for metaphysical primacy contained in traditional idealism. For Derrida, the abstractions of metaphysics are themselves the products of metaphysical systems and the differential play of language. Both Critical Theory and New French Theory insist that the abstractions of philosophy be contextualized in a system of social relations or language in order to overcome one-sided, limited, and misleading metaphysical abstractions.

Yet Critical Theorists also draw their own boundaries and borderlines, and make and use abstractions to illuminate certain social processes and phenomena. Critical Theory always attacked positivistic theories which simply mirrored existing social realities, and called for social theory to abstract itself from existing society, and to provide critical perspectives and alternatives which could be used to criticize and transform oppressive aspects of the existing society (Horkheimer 1972). Critical Theory thus called for a certain sort of abstraction based on withdrawal, negation, and the projection of alternatives. As Marcuse (1968, pp. 150-151) put it: "This abstractness, this radical withdrawal from the given, at least clears a path along which the individual in bourgeois society can seek the truth and adhere to what is known." [2]

Furthermore, following Marx (1968 and 1973), Critical Theory analyzed a variety of processes of social abstraction which required (necessarily abstract) categories to capture the mode of abstraction actually being produced by capitalist development. Under capitalism, one is forced to sell oneself on the labor market in the mode of "abstract labor" whereby one's specific

potentialities, talents, needs, etc. are generally indifferent to the employer who is primarily interested in the profitable deployment of one's labor power. As Georg Lohmann (1980, pp. 270-272) puts it, "abstract labor" for Marx "is indifferent to the particular kinds of activity, as well as to the working individuals and their social situations. These marks of indifference find expression in the determinations of labor which produces exchange value; it is characterized as 'human labor' that is 'the same,' 'without difference,' 'without individuality,' 'abstract,' 'universal.' These same features continue on in the relations of indifference that mark the workers' behavior toward others and toward himself."

As Critical Theorists later emphasized, reification under capitalism involves a series of abstractions in various spheres of life (Kellner 1989). On the labor market, as noted, my concrete talents are disregarded by the captains and managers of the labor process who are simply interested in my labor power. As a consumer I am likewise interchangeable with any other consumer who happens to have the money and inclination to purchase a particular product. Confronting bureaucracies and organizations I am also "reified," considered as an abstract person no different from anyone else. Similar abstractions take place in voting behavior, in polling, in taxation, and any number of other activities where quantitative and instrumental relations subordinate qualitative values and institutions.

The criteria of reification are therefore on this account abstraction, interchangeability, quantifiability, and indifference toward concrete individuality. The concepts of Critical Theory therefore attempt to capture the processes through which these forms of social abstraction take place and offer as concepts "rational abstractions" which capture the actual social process taking place behind the back of the individual and which therefore appear as "second nature." The abstractions of Critical Theory thus attempt to demystify this process and to indicate that what appears to be "natural" is really a result of highly artificial and oppressive social institutions and relations. Critical Theory therefore provides a "cognitive mapping" of the social reality constituted by capitalist society, and like all maps abstracts, condenses, and models in order to provide orientation and an overview of one's terrain.

Certain versions of New French Theory, as I shall indicate shortly, reject such abstractions as totalizing mystifications (Lyotard 1985), and indeed attempt to undermine many distinctions made by the Critical Theorists by rejecting such concepts as truth, reality, representation, reason, etc. (Baudrillard 1983a and 1983b). After examining a prototypical case of New French Theory's project of subverting traditional boundaries and categories of social theory, I shall return in the conclusion to defend Marx's notion of "rational abstraction" against postmodernists like Baudrillard.

I would conclude this discussion, however, by noting that "abstraction" per se is therefore neither "good" nor "bad." Rather, it is a question as to whether one contextualizes one's concepts and abstractions, and uses them to actually illuminate social processes and phenomena rather than to decontextualize one's abstractions or concepts so as to distort and mystify social reality. Thus, if boundaries between conceptual domains and segments of social reality are seen as socially constructed, provisional, and relative to a given social context and specifiable theoretical tasks and issues, conceptual abstractions can obviously be of use in analyzing, criticizing, and transforming one's subject matter or social life itself. From this perspective, it is therefore

abstractions which purport to be atemporal, universal, essential, etc. that are illegitimate or "bad," while abstractions which present themselves as historical, contextual, and the product of theoretical discourses are legitimate, "rational abstractions," to use Marx's term which I shall introduce later. With this in mind, let us now consider some abstractions concerning contemporary theories of history and the present age which have caused considerable controversy in recent years.

### *Postmodernism and the Dialectics of Borderlines*

Critical Theory also established itself as a historical theory which, following Hegel and Marx, sketched the borderlines between various stages of history. While I am using the term "boundaries" as a synchronic concept which describes certain conceptual divisions made within a given domain of social reality at a specific point in time, I am using the term "borderlines" as a diachronic concept which traces historical stages of development from one historical era to the next. In my forthcoming study of Critical Theory (Kellner 1989), I argue that the now classical Critical Theory of the Institute for Social Research articulates the transition from the stage of market, entrepreneurial capitalism (best described by Karl Marx) to the stage of monopoly and state capitalism. I believe that the Critical Theory of Society developed from the 1930s to the early 1960s provides one of the first and best accounts of the rise of state, monopoly capitalism, and that its' analyses of the new relationships between the economy and the state in the totalitarian and democratic forms of state capitalism, of consumerism and the development of the consumer society, of the culture industries, of the incorporation of science and technology into new relations of production and forms of social control, of changing patterns of socialization, personality development, and values, and of the decline of the individual --that these central themes of the now classical Critical Theory of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, etc. -- provide the best theoretical analysis of the socio-economic and cultural conditions that produced the configuration of neo-capitalist societies from the 1930s through the early 60s, and thus of the borderlines between an earlier and later stage of capitalism.

In other words, I believe that Critical Theory moves beyond the borderlines established by previous radical social theory (i.e. classical Marxism), and provides a new model of a critical and radical social theory of its era, sketching out a theory of the new historical epoch. I also argue, however, in my forthcoming book *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity* that the earlier stages of Critical Theory fail to account for changes in the social conditions and techno-political infrastructure of capitalist societies from the 1960s to the present (Kellner 1989). Consequently, I would question aspects of their account of the economy, state, culture, media, and everyday life, and would propose development, revision, and up-dating of Critical Theory in the present social conjuncture.

Several questions arise at this point: is it now time to draw a new borderline between the stage of capitalism conceptualized by Critical Theory and contemporary society, or does it still provide an adequate model of today's socio-economic, political, and cultural situation? It is precisely at this point that Postmodernism meets Critical Theory, so to speak. Like Critical Theory, New French Theorist Jean Baudrillard attacks the fundamental boundaries drawn by traditional and contemporary philosophy, social theory, and common sense, but his critique here goes much further, as I'll suggest shortly, than the Critical Theorists. Furthermore, Baudrillard provides a

theory of the new conditions of postindustrial, postmodern societies, which themselves allegedly obliterate the boundaries between established categories, classes, political parties, etc.

Baudrillard argues, in effect, that we are now entering a new stage of history that requires us to move beyond previous social theories and critique into the brave new world of simulations, media, information, DNA, satellites, terrorism, postmodern art and so on and so forth. Thus Baudrillard, in a sense, does in relation to the classical Critical Theory of Society precisely what I am claiming that Critical Theory did in regard to classical Marxism: to cross the borderlines from the previous historical epoch (modernity) in order to chart out the features of the new postmodern stage, and to rethink the project of developing radical social theory and politics in relation to these changes.

In general, the most widespread and influential attempt to chart out the borderlines that will conceptually "map" the contours and features of the present era fall under the rubric of "postmodernism." It is claimed that we are now in a "postmodern condition" or "postmodern scene," and that the categories, modes of thought and representation, and politics of the previous stage are no longer relevant in the current stage of history (Jameson 1984, Lyotard 1985, and Kroker/Cook 1986). While Baudrillard was not one of the initiators of the discourse of postmodernism, he has in the 1980s jumped on the band-wagon and in fact his work --especially from the mid-1970s to the present -- presents a rather extreme and in some ways paradigmatic postmodern social theory. In the next section, I shall discuss some of the fundamental categories of Baudrillard's postmodern social theory, and shall then offer some critical remarks on its limitations. Jean Baudrillard's Implosive Postmodernism

In his first three books, Baudrillard argued that the classical Marxian critique of political economy needed to be supplemented by semiological theories of the sign. His argument was, first, that the transition from the earlier stage of competitive market capitalism to the stage of monopoly capitalism required increased attention to demand management, to augmenting and steering consumption (JB 1973 and Kellner 1989b). At this stage, from around 1900 to the 1960s, the need to intensify demand supplemented concern with lowering production costs, augmenting production, etc. because in the era of monopoly capitalism -- when economic concentration, new production techniques, etc. accelerated capacity for mass production -- the capitalists were increasingly concerned with increasing and managing consumption.

The result was the now familiar consumer society which provided the main focus of Baudrillard's early work. In this society, advertising, packaging, display, fashion, "emancipated" sexuality, mass media and culture, and the proliferation of commodities multiplied the quantity of signs and spectacles, and produced a proliferation of what Baudrillard calls "sign-value." Henceforth, Baudrillard claims, commodities are not merely to be characterized by use-value and exchange value, as in Marx's theory of the commodity, but sign-value -- the expression and mark of style, prestige, luxury, power, etc. -- becomes an increasingly important part of the commodity and consumption. That is, commodities were allegedly bought and displayed as much for their sign-value as their use-value, and the phenomenon of sign-value became an essential constituent of the commodity and consumption in the consumer society.

In his writings from 1975 to the present, Baudrillard projects a vision of a media and high-tech

society where people are caught up in the play of images, spectacles, simulacra, communications networks, etc. that have less and less relationship to an outside, to an external "reality," to such an extent that the very concepts of the social, political, or even "reality" no longer seem to have any meaning. And the vertiginous, aleatory, and blurry (some of Baudrillard's favorite metaphors) omnipresent and ubiquitous media saturated consciousness is in such a state of narcosis and mesmerized fascination that the concept of meaning itself (which depends on stable boundaries, fixed structures, shared consensus) dissolves. The last decade or so of Baudrillard's writing can be read as an attempt to think through the implications of this new primal scene, this new situation and, if possible, to find a way out. (Though he eventually concludes that there is no way out {JB 1983c}).

Baudrillard's main thesis of his postmodern social theory is that what he calls "radical semiurgy," the production and proliferation of signs, has created a society of simulations governed by implosion and hyperreality. Baudrillard's narrative concerns the end of the era of production, and the advent of the new era of simulations. In 1976, in *L'échange symbolique et la mort* Baudrillard announced the end of political economy and thus the end of the Marxist problematic:

The end of labor. The end of production. The end of political economy.

The end of the dialectic signifier/signified which permitted an accumulation of knowledge and of meaning, and of a linear syntagm of cumulative discourse. The end simultaneously of the dialectic of exchange value/use value which alone previously made possible capital accumulation and social production. The end of linear discourse. The end of linear merchandising. The end of the classic era of the sign. The end of the era of production" (JB 1976, p. 20).

We are instead, Baudrillard claims, in a new era of simulation in which social reproduction (information processing, socialization and knowledge industries, media, cybernetic control models, etc.) replaces production as the organizing principle of society. In this era, labor is no longer a force of production but is itself a "sign among signs" (Baudrillard 1973, p. 23). Labor is not primarily productive in this situation but is a sign of one's social position, of one's servitude and being integrated into the social apparatus: "The important thing is that every one be a terminal in the network, a tiny terminal, but a term nevertheless, ... The choice of occupation, the utopia of an occupation custom made for everyone means that the die is cast, that the system of socialization is complete. Labor power is no longer violently bought and sold; it is designed, it is marketed, it is merchandised. Production thus joins the consumerist system of signs" (Baudrillard 1973, pp. 28-29).

In this new situation, one's labor power, body, sexuality, unconscious, etc. are not primarily productive forces but are "operational variables," "the code's chess pieces," to be mobilized into social institutions and practices. Wages too bear no rational relation to one's work and what one produces, but rather signify that one is playing the game, is fitting into the system (Baudrillard 1973, pp. 36ff.), and money is a "cool medium" which allows participation and involvement in the system, and itself volatilizes into an international system of "floating" speculative capital (Baudrillard 1973, pp. 39ff.). But, crucially, for Baudrillard, political economy is no longer the foundation, the social determinant, or even a structural "reality" in which other phenomena can

be interpreted and explained (Baudrillard 1973, pp. 53ff.). Instead we live in a "hyperreality" of simulations in which images, spectacles, and the play of signs replace the logic of production and class conflict as key constituents of contemporary capitalist societies.

Modernity for Baudrillard is thus the era of production governed by the industrial bourgeoisie. The era of simulations by contrast is an era of information and signs governed by models, codes, and cybernetics. Baudrillard never specifies the economic forces or social groups behind this process, and thus advances a sort of technological determinism whereby models and codes become the primary determinants of social reality. In a society of simulations, the model or code structures social reality and erodes distinctions between the model and the real. Using McLuhan's cybernetic concept of implosion, Baudrillard claims that in the postmodern world the boundary between image or simulation and reality implodes, and with this the very experience and ground of "the real" disappears. In *TV World*, for instance, the image or model of the Doctor (the simulated Doctor) is taken for the Real Doctor; thus Robert Anderson, who played Dr. Welby, received thousands of letters asking for medical advice and later appeared in ads where he advised readers on the wonders of decaf coffee. Raymond Burr successively played lawyer Perry Mason and detective Ironside and received thousands of letters asking for legal advice in the 1950s and detective aid in the 1960s. And soap opera villains and villainesses must hire body guards to go out in public to protect them from irate fans angered by their shenanigans in soap world.

More recently, TV programs appear which directly simulate real-life situations such as *The People's Court* which reenacts the trials and tribulations of the "petty bourgeoisie," while TV evangelicists simulate religion and Ronald Reagan simulates politics. In this universe, the simulation models become more "real" than the actual institutions, and not only is it increasingly difficult to distinguish between simulations and reality, but the reality of simulation becomes the criterion of "the real" itself. Consequently, in his 1987 State of the Union speech and then his twelve-minute television talk after public outrage over his Arms to the Ayatollahs/Guns to the contras scandal, TV commentators were more concerned with whether Reagan was still able to simulate being President than with the substance of what he said. He got good marks for both speeches by commentators because he continued to be able to simulate the Presidency whereas no doubt had he failed in the art of simulation calls for his resignation or impeachment would have probably followed.

In the postmodern mediascape, boundaries between information and entertainment, images and politics, also implode. As many commentators have pointed out, TV news and documentary assumes more and more the form of entertainment, using dramatic and melodramatic codes to frame their stories. CBS' news magazine show *West 57th Street* begins with a collage of iconic images of the news correspondants who are presented as if they were characters in a sitcom or weekly drama, while MTV, Entertainment Tonight, and various talk shows utilize the frames of news commentators to informationalize the entertainment format, and to disguise culture industry hype as "facts." The result is what has been called "infotainment" in which boundaries between information and entertainment collapse.

Similar implosion is evident in recent political campaigns where image is more important than substance, and political campaigns become increasingly dependent on media advisors, public

relations "experts," and pollsters who have transformed politics into image contests, or *Sign Struggles*, and which thus benefit politicians able to afford the sort of television advertising and high-tech media campaigns, and which lend themselves to attractive image-packaging.

The concept of simulation for Baudrillard can be contrasted to both "representation" and "dissimulation." Previously, images, ideas, signs and theories were conceptualized as representations of reality and were appraised as to their veracity, reliability, exactitude, etc. "True" representations of the real were contrasted with dissimulations, with images or ideologies that dissemble or distort; ideology critique thus involved demystification which unmasked the distortions and perhaps hermeneutically recaptured "the real." Simulations, by contrast replace the real world with a pseudo-world through proliferating an universe of images, signs, and models which appear as "real" and are taken to be so. In this situation, the simulations and the real are so intertwined that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other. As Steve Best (forthcoming) puts it: "Against dissimulation, simulation, too, involves the production of illusory conditions. But where in dissimulation the Real and the True are always hermeneutically recuperable behind a concealing mist or mask, simulation erases these final terms and destroys the very opposition between true/false, reality/illusion. Dissimulation thus allows the reversibility of illusion and truth; in simulation they are too intertwined to be distinguished and are irreversible."

In Baudrillard's postmodern universe, the society of simulations takes on the appearance of "hyperreality" which does not signify irreality or illusion, but more reality, an implosion of appearance/reality that is more real than real. For Baudrillard the models of America in Disneyland are more real than their instantiations in the social world, as the United States becomes more and more like Disneyland. The hyperreal for Baudrillard is a condition whereby models replace "the real" exemplified in such phenomena as the ideal home in women's or lifestyle magazines, ideal sex as portrayed in sex manuals or "relationship" books (or porno movies), ideal fashion as exemplified in ads or fashion shows, ideal computer skills as set forth in computer manuals, and so on. In these cases, the model or hyperreal becomes an ideal and a determinant of "the real" and the boundary between hyperreality and everyday life is erased.

In other words, Baudrillard claims that in a society of simulations the hyperreal comes to constitute the real as people imitate and instantiate hyperreal simulation models, or rather the distinction between model and reality, real and hyperreal disappears. In this world, Reagan's smile is a hyperreal sign of positivity instantiating a politically efficacious image of a cheerful, upbeat corporate manager; TV religion projects hyperreal spectacles of religion, more real than the old-time religion in the local church because its slick practitioners are able to produce religious discourses and performances closer to the model of religion than the local minister. Models of track suburban houses, interior design manuals, exercise video-cassettes, Dr. Spock's child-care prescriptions, cook books, etc. all provide hyperreal simulation models which become constituents of everyday life in a hyperreal society of simulations.

For Baudrillard, media semiurgy, simulations and hyperreality collapse distinctions between the signifier and the signified, between model and reality, between representation and the represented, and thus obliterate meaning, truth, and reference. Although deconstruction has problematized relations between language and the world, the signifier and the signified, few

post-structuralists have gone as far as Baudrillard in collapsing distinctions between words and reality, images and objects, into an undifferentiated flux of pure signifiers, simulations without referents. The Baudrillardian universe can therefore be read as an effect of the post-structuralist critique of meaning and reference taken to an extreme limit where the effluence of simulacra replaces the play of textuality or discourses. This free-floating vertigo of simulacra in Baudrillard's theory projects the image of a universe with no stable structures or finalities in which to anchor theory or politics. Indeed, in many of his writings, the universe seems to be without boundaries in a vertiginous flux where all the old boundaries and distinctions of philosophy, social and political theory, and capitalist society are imploded into an undifferentiated flux of simulacra. Yet Baudrillard (at least in the late 70s and early 80s) also suggests that there is a quite precise and important borderline between the previous and the current social order, between modernity and postmodernity (Kellner 1989b), and his claims to novelty and originality orbit around the sense that he is up to something new, that he is catching some new social conditions and phenomena, that he is moving rapidly beyond previous thinking, boundaries, and politics.

It is here, I suggest, on Baudrillard's borderline between the modern and the postmodern, that a critical interrogation of his thought and politics should begin. On this point, almost every discussion of Baudrillard in English seems to presuppose that he is right, that we are in something like a postmodern condition, that we have left modernity behind and are in a qualitatively new society where the old categories and old distinctions no longer hold. Such a vision rests, I believe, partly on wishful thinking and partly on a desire to differentiate oneself from old-fashioned traditionalists, while positioning oneself as avant-garde. Stronger, in my forthcoming book on Baudrillard, I shall show that his postmodern social theory rests on some shaky theoretical premises, especially concerning the role of the media, cybernetics and design, and representation and social reproduction in the contemporary world (Kellner 1989b).

### Living on the Borderline

Consequently, in confronting the differences between Baudrillard and the now classical Critical Theory, the following issues arise: is Baudrillard correct that we have entered a postmodern society, or are we still stuck in a more stream-lined and advanced version of the old capitalist society? Are the fundamental boundaries within social theory (between classes, forces and relations of production, Left and Right, domination and emancipation, representations and reality, etc.) still intact and effective, or have they been superseded and imploded by contemporary social developments? What is the status of representation, social critique, emancipation, and socialism in the allegedly postmodern world? In short, are Marxism and Critical Theory still viable enterprises, or have their assumptions and positions been vitiated by contemporary social developments?

My own position is that if Marxism and Critical Theory want to continue to be relevant to the theoretical and political concerns of the present age, they must address the issues advanced by the postmodern challenge to previous traditions of social theory. This means that critical social theory today must attempt to theorize the new social conditions and phenomena analyzed by the postmodernists, and must demonstrate that their categories and theories continue to be applicable and illuminating in theorizing the new social conditions. This in turn requires rethinking such

enterprises as Marxism and Critical Theory in terms of the new issues posed and the new challenges advanced by the current configurations of the media, consumer and information societies; by cybernetics and design; by the restructuring of labor and production; by the new configurations of class; and by the new modes of the colonization of everyday life.

The responses of those identified with Critical Theory to New French Theory and the postmodernism debate so far, however, have been highly defensive and not particularly productive. Habermas has tended to interpret postmodern thinkers under the sign of irrationalism, and has himself continued to defend modernity and rationalism without always successfully addressing the critiques of modernity, rationalism, and his own work advanced by the postmodernists and New French Theory (Habermas 1987). Most recent articles on postmodernism and New French Theory in *Telos* -- which has consistently championed certain versions of neo-Marxism and Critical Theory in the U.S. over the past two decades -- are primarily hostile, dismissive, and not particularly illuminating (Berman 1984 and Wolin 1984). Their mode of reception is primarily an Adornesque absolute negation rather than a Benjaminian redemptive hermeneutic which would attempt to appropriate or redeem what is valuable and useful in New French Theory.

Indeed, I would maintain that Critical Theory has so far rejected New French Theory precisely at those points where its own classical theories are most in need of revision and development: i.e. in attempting to theorize new social conditions and phenomena like the consumer society, media, information, computerization, etc. The classical Critical Theory of the consumer society tends to downplay the importance of sign-value and the semiological dimension, while its media theories and ideology critique of popular culture often underemphasized the importance of form, of codes, of the nature and structure of media themselves --precisely the focus of the best of the New French Theory (Kellner 1989a and 1989b). And, finally, New French Theory has focused on such new phenomena as cybernetics, computerization, the information society, etc. that have appeared since the classical texts of Critical Theory were produced which Critical Theory today must deal with if it is not to become irrelevant to the current problems of the present age.

The attempts of New French Theory, however, to conceptualize these new phenomena in terms of a "post," and often anti-Marxian discourse and framework, however, are highly problematical as is their frequent denunciation of macro-social theory in favor of micro theory and politics (this is particularly true of Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, and others). It is my view that New French Theorists like Baudrillard, Lyotard and Foucault have made a serious theoretical and political mistake in severing their work from the Marxian critique of capitalism precisely at a point when the logic of capital has been playing an increasingly important role in structuring the new stage of society which I conceptualize as a new stage of capitalism -- capitalism as techno-capital (Kellner 1989a).

Indeed, I would argue that Marxian categories are of central importance precisely in analyzing the phenomena focused on by Baudrillard and New French Theory: the consumer society, the media, information, computers, etc. For it is capitalism that is determining what sort of media, information, computers, etc. are being produced and distributed precisely according to their logic and interests. That is, in techno-capitalist societies, information, as Herbert Schiller and others have shown, is being more and more commodified, accessible only to those who can pay for it

and who have access to it. Education itself is becoming more and more commodified as computers become more essential to the process of education, while more and more domains of knowledge and information are commodified and transmitted through computers (I'm thinking both of computer learning programs which force consumers to buy programs to learn typing, math, history, foreign languages, etc. as well as modem-programs and firms like Compu-Serve which make access an abundance of information, entertainment, networking, etc. via computer for those who can afford to pay its per minute information prices).

Against Foucault, Lyotard, and others who reject macro-theory, the category of totality, or meta-narratives, I would argue that precisely now we need such totalizing theories to attempt to capture the new totalizations being undertaken by capitalism in the realm of consumption, the media, information, etc. Now, more than ever, we need macro-theories that will attempt to cognitively map the context of the new forms of social development and the relationships between spheres like the economy, culture, education, politics, etc. Furthermore, unlike Mark Poster (forthcoming) and others, I believe that it is a mistake to sever the mode of information from the mode of production, and believe that there continues to be "determination in the last instance" by the economic in the current stage of capitalism. Thus I would propose that the new social conditions, new technological developments, and new political challenges should be conceptualized in terms of a theory of techno-capitalism rather than postmodernism. With Fredric Jameson (1984), I would propose that we are currently in a new configuration of capitalism where postmodernism can be read as the cultural logic of capital but where the hegemony of capital is still the fundamental principle of social organization and where capital attempts to control ever more domains of life. I would, however, agree with those who claim that we need to rethink the problematics of radical politics, of socialism or even radical social transformation or emancipation, in the light of the new social conditions and challenges -- though I shall not address this issue here.

Yet against a radical implosive postmodernism such as one finds in Baudrillard -- and Arthur Kroker's and David Cook's *The Postmodern Scene* (1986) is an even more extreme case -- I would argue for the need to draw boundaries, or conceptual distinctions, and to make what Marx calls "rational abstractions" rather than leaping into the delirious postmodern implosion of all boundaries, abstractions, and distinctions in the vertiginous flux of the hyperreal. As Wittgenstein and Derrida attacked metaphysical abstractions which dissolved differences in unifying schemes, we should undertake to criticize ideological-metaphysical abstractions yet should also draw distinctions which make connections and which conceptualize important differences. As Marx put it in his introduction to the *Grundrisse*: "It might seem, therefore, that in order to talk about production at all we must either pursue the process of historic development through its different phases, or declare beforehand that we are dealing with a specific historical epoch such as e.g. modern bourgeois production, which is indeed our particular theme. However, all epochs of production have certain common traits, common characteristics. Production in general is an abstraction, but a rational abstraction insofar as it really brings out and fixes a common element" (i.e. in different modes of production). Yet Marx goes on to insist that: "Still, this general category, this common element sifted out by comparison, is itself segmented many times over and splits into different determinations. Some determinations belong to all epochs, others only to a few" (Marx 1976, p. 106). Thus, while there are general "determinations valid for production as such," and so for all epochs, we must not, he warns, obscure "their essential

differences" (Marx 1976, p. 101).

Consequently, for Marx "rational abstraction" fixes a "common element" that plays a constitutive role in various situations and contexts. The "concrete" in this analysis is itself a product of many determinations, many relations, and "rational abstraction" thus designates specific determinations in a multiple and multi-dimensional relational chain. "Bad abstraction" is thus overcome by situating abstractions back into a specific set of differential relations, contextualizing one's concepts and analyses within a set of historically specific and complex social relations. This is what, I maintain, we need to do in the postmodernism debate: we should grasp the differences between the old and the new stages of society (or art, philosophy, etc.), and the continuities between the previous and new stage of society -- a continuity constituted precisely by the continuing primacy of capitalist relations of production in the current organization of society.[4] Thus, against postmodernists who celebrate the radically "new" -- and rupture, discontinuity, and difference, -- I would argue that we need to characterize both the continuities and the discontinuities in the historical process and that this involves both pointing to ruptures and breaks in recent history as well as continuities.

Consequently, while New French Theory has attempted to cross the borderline and to chart out the terrain of the new, their claims for an absolute break between modernity and postmodernity are not always convincing. Although we may be living within a borderline, or transitional space, between the modern and the postmodern, and may be entering a terrain where old modes of thought and language are not always useful, it seems at this point in time that in many ways, New French Theory is itself flawed and not of much use in helping us to understand and resolve many of the crucial theoretical and political problems that we currently face (i.e. moving beyond the current age of conservative hegemony, learning to use and live with new technologies in ways that will enhance human life, and understanding and dealing with a wide range of social problems from technological unemployment to AIDS). Thus while we clearly need new theories and politics to understand the conflicts, problems, and developments of the contemporary era I believe that we need new concatenations of Marxism, Critical Theory, and New French theory to solve the theoretical and political problems which confront us today.

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### Notes

1 For more systematic discussions of ideology, see Kellner 1978 and Thompson 1984.

2 Generally speaking, in their 1930s writings, the Critical Theorists tended to utilize the conception of abstraction -- as I am here -- contextually and dialectically, attempting to

distinguish between what Marx called "rational abstraction" and the "bad abstractions" of bourgeois ideology. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, however, one can read Adorno and Horkheimer as carrying out a more thoroughgoing critique of abstraction per se which puts them in the orbit of New French Theory. For example: "Abstraction, the tool of enlightenment, treats its objects as it did fate, the notion of which it rejects; it liquidates them .... The distance between subject and object, a presupposition of abstraction, is grounded in the distance from the thing itself which the master achieved through the mastered.... The universality of ideas as developed by discursive logic, domination in the conceptual sphere, is raised up on the basis of actual domination. The dissolution of the magical heritage, of the old diffuse ideas, by conceptual unity, expresses the hierarchical constitution of life determined by those who are free. The individuality that learned order and subordination in the subjection of the world, soon wholly equated truth with the regulative thought without whose fixed distinctions universal truth cannot exist" (Ibid, pp. 13-14).

3 As I argue elsewhere (Kellner 1988), such extravagant claims undermine the postmodern attack on totality, metanarratives, and grand theory.

4 These same arguments can be mobilized against claims that we are entering a new postindustrial society; see Kellner, *Critical Theory* and "Postmodernism as Social Theory," Ibid. for further discussion.

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