

Revenge of the Crystal: An Interview with Jean Baudrillard by Guy Bellavance

Just as there is *science fiction*, Jean Baudrillard's *Les Stratégies fatales* (1983) would be a work of *sociology fiction*. 'The revenge of the crystal' the subtitle announces. What is really at issue here is a theoretical narrative in which the object takes revenge. Baudrillard would like the object to speak for itself. And the object accounts for itself by employing the language of paradox. Indeed, he believes that the only antidote to the increasing carcinogenic irreversibility of our contemporary societies would be paradoxical narrative as an instrument of reversibility. This is perhaps what a fatal strategy would be: a theory that turns back on itself to become an object, not a theory of objects, but a theory-object, a theory in which the object would have passions.

Passing through Montreal, he gave this interview only a few days after a public lecture relating to the book. Reactions to it were stormy, if not openly hostile. Aren't these 'fatal strategies' but a flight in advance, a denial of the real and authenticity, a retreat into artificial ecstasy, and an abdication before this new power of objects? It's because Jean Baudrillard seeks a *mode of disappearance* which he would moreover like to substitute for the dominant mode of being that is the *mode of production*. Contrary to the acceleration of communication networks, he thus seeks a slowness: inertia. And yet in the same breath he seeks something faster than communication: the challenge and the duel. This is

the whole paradox of his discourse: on the one hand he seeks inertia and silence, and on the other the challenge and the duel. In brief, conflict and seduction in the one alloy, in the one crystal.

He must thus offer himself as a fatal object. When he arrived in Montreal at the beginning of spring, the unseasonably mild weather vanished and winter returned with a vengeance. And at the beginning of the interview the tape recorder wouldn't work, etc. Is it that objects and nature would be aware of this person's 'fatal' imaginary? It is moreover a Principle of Evil that Baudrillard would like to arouse. According to him, it is the only principle that keeps vigil over the present ecstasy. For society has crossed a threshold and moved full stride into permanent ecstasy: the ecstasy of the social (the masses), of size (obesity), of violence (terror), of sex (obscenity), and of information (simulation). This ecstasy is a movement of potentialisation, a rise in power or a redoubling. The mass is 'more social than the social', obesity is 'fatter than the fat', terror is 'more violent than the violent', obscenity is 'more sexual than sex', simulation is 'truer than the true', and fashion is 'more beautiful than the beautiful'. "I am not beautiful, I am worse," said Marie Dorval.¹

Among fatal objects, the work of art appears to occupy a privileged position. As Baudelaire had correctly seen, art is the *absolute merchandise*, the absolute object. It belongs to those powers of the object which, beyond the ultimate principle of the subject, bring about a fatal reversibility: the power of the pure object to respond to alienation on its own terms. Baudrillard is not, for all that, an 'aesthete'. For him, this power of the work of art has undoubtedly much more affinity with the power of the masses, where he sees an equally strong passion for intensification:

... the human being can find a greater boredom in vacations than in everyday life—a boredom intensified because comprised of all the elements of happiness and distraction. The main point is the predestination of vacations to boredom, the bitter and triumphal presentiment of its inescapability. Do people really disavow their everyday life when they seek an alternative to it? On the contrary, they embrace it as their fate: they intensify it in appearances of the contrary, they immerse themselves in it to the point of ecstasy, and they confirm the monotony of it by an even greater monotony. If one doesn't understand that, one understands nothing of this collective stupefaction, since it is a magnificent act of excess. I'm not joking: people don't want to be amused, they seek a fatal distraction.²

The era of transgression thus would be finished. We need to substitute an ironic theory for critical theory. There would perhaps only be

but one fatal strategy: theory as objective irony, a theory-object, a theory in which the object is always presumed to be more cunning than the subject, and in which the object always ironically takes the detour of the subject. Faced with this potentialisation and redoubling of things, the subject must learn how to disappear in order to reappear as object. But isn't this a bit banal?

What is the difference between a banal strategy and a fatal strategy?

Indeed, such a detour or opposition is a bit facile. As soon as one draws near it, it becomes much more complicated. This banality of the masses and the silent majorities is all part of our ambience. But for me it still remains a fatal strategy: in other words, it is something unaccountable for itself, inescapable, but also indecipherable, an immanent type of fatality. It is something at the heart of the system, at the strategic core of the system, something like its point of inertia, its blind spot. This corresponds to my definition of the fatal (even though there can be none). For all this behaviour of the masses, mass art, Beaubourg, etc., is the extreme limit of banality, the apogee of banality. Of course, my work used to revolve around these things. But let us say that it was the kind of fatality that takes systems of simulation to their limit and that produces this 'mass' object.

On the other hand, seduction is for me a fatal strategy as well. For me, it is the finest or most beautiful example of a sort of fatality—something quite different, let us say, from the banality of sex, but a wager of another order, an enchanted order; even though, when it comes to the strategy of the masses, it is in fact more disenchanting. But the fatal can cover both aspects. To put it simply, they have no point in common: there is always something like irony behind the fatal. It isn't a tragic, pathetic or romantic type of fatality, nor is it a religious fatalism: it is something ironic. And it isn't even a subjective irony—there is no subject behind it. Perhaps the grand epoch of subjective irony or radicality has now come to an end. It would be the end of an era in which all philosophy had a stake (Kierkegaard as well as the Romantics) and the beginning of a type of objective irony.

It seems to me that behind these strategies there exists something like irony with respect to finalities: not a refusal of finalities, not a transgression of tragedy, not a violent destruction of tragedy, but an ironic deviation of things from the finalities always prescribed by the subject. So, for me, irony would be almost an anti-definition: isn't this the secret, but perhaps the most obvious one . . . of objective irony?

It is the revenge of the object?

Yes, it is. It is what I have called 'the revenge of the crystal', and in reality I started out from that. The book crystallised around this theme. After the title came to me the book happened very quickly. Of course, I already had many of the elements. What is the crystal? It is the object, the pure object, the pure event, something no longer with any precise origin or end, to which the subject would like to attribute an origin and an end even though it has none, and which today perhaps begins to give account of itself. Perhaps there is now the possibility that the object will say something to us, but above all the possibility that it will avenge itself! I was quite happy to see it in a relatively impassioned form, for it may be that objects have passions as much as subjects do: passions not unlike ruse, irony, indifference—indifferential and inertial passions, which are in direct opposition to those tonic and finalistic passions of the subject (e.g. desire, the demand for enjoyment, etc.). The object, on the other hand, is something like indifference. This is also a passion, but an ironic one to my mind. That remains to be explored, perhaps by expanding upon certain chapters in the book. I haven't done that yet. But if I do maybe it would be a theory of *object-passions*, of the object's passions, of objective passions.

It is clear that your relation to the object has changed considerably since *Le Système des objets* (1968) . . .

Yes, it has completely changed! It's no longer even the issue, except as a kind of reference to this obsession with objects. It is the same term. But what really appeals to me—and there's an irony in this, too—is to be completely immersed in objects, to have started from objects, from an obsession with them. Of course, the problem was not immediately one of objects. It was simply a means of moving beyond them. But finally it was nonetheless a departure from objects, and so ends up in . . . the Object! (*Laughter*)

In any case, the analysis of the system of objects was still a round-about way of grasping the problematic, the dialectic of subject-object. There is a system at work here, but something different all the same. There is another logic simply than the alterity of the object, alienation by the object. These are already tired problematics. So the attempt to grasp objects as a system already went a little way towards disrupting the traditional view of things. But ultimately this analysis went off in a different direction.

This object that you talk about seems to be a quasi-subject. It isn't totally passive. And it expresses many things.

No, it isn't passive, and yet it is not a subject in the sense that it has an imaginary. It is without imaginary, but this is its strength, its sovereignty. This is because it is not caught in a system of projection or identification: the mirror stage, desire, or whatever. The object is without desire. It is what in a sense escapes desire, and so belongs to the order of destiny. In my opinion there are only two things: either it's desire, or it's destiny!

It is without negativity as well?

Yes, it is without negativity.

It is always in the superlative?

Yes, certainly. But here it links up with many of the recent trends: not the search for a positivism, but for a positivity, for an immanence of things. With Deleuze for example, even though we are undoubtedly very far apart, there is exactly the same search, one that goes beyond even the most radical kind of subjectivity—to discover what exists there, what the object has to tell us, what the world as such has to tell us. Could it really have no immanent processes? There is no emotivity in it, and yet something comes to pass. It is not passivity. On the contrary, it is playfulness.

What exactly do you mean by this passion for potentialisation and redoubling which you discuss at the beginning of your book—this truer than the true, this more beautiful than the beautiful, these qualities that have entirely absorbed the energy of their opposites?

A fantasy . . . I don't know. Some might even say it is mystical. I don't think so because there is no cosmic principle here. It nonetheless remains a game, and so there must be a rule of play, which precludes unification or a kind of fusion of things. On the contrary, these intensified effects stand out in direct contrast to others things, precisely those things which belong to the order of the mirror, resemblance, and the image. It is strictly beyond the imaginary. And in that sense it is also a hyperreality, because such intensification is equivalent to a sort of absolutisation. Basically, as soon as it is accepted as a process (for that is what a mobile state would be), it becomes something that passes into radical objectivity—not objectivity in the scientific sense, but, as the *other*³ would say, radical '*objectivity*'.

That may well be a sort of revenge. We have placed the object in the position of object: the subject has devoted itself to it as object, but with all the safeguards, etc. And the object escapes this kind of trap, this

strategy which belongs to the subject, by entering into radical objectivity. At this moment it actually escapes the systems of decoding and interpretation. The problem is a bit like knowing if this thing that interests me is a modern detour or vicissitude, or if it is ultimately a question of metaphysics. I believe it is both. For me, there is an increasingly metaphysical dimension, or an anti-metaphysical one—which amounts to the same thing. Yet my interest lies in the actual modern conjunction: not a banal fatality, nor even the object of metaphysics or philosophy. Basically I'm not a philosopher, in the sense of being interested in arguments or terminology. Such things don't escape me, but I don't start out from that. It's not what I try to do. That's the way it goes! What interests me is to set out from contemporary nuclear situations: from object-situations, or even from strategies of the masses. They are the vicissitudes of modernity—or postmodernity, I have no idea—but those which are our lot. Even at the beginning, the 'system of objects' was nevertheless something that had never been produced within other cultures. Here we might have a specific destiny.

Would you still call yourself a sociologist in this sense?

But of course! Sociology was born with modernity, with the investigation of modernity. Yes, I would be a sociologist in this sense.

Would you still place yourself in the framework of modernity or, as we like to say, in postmodernity? How would you situate yourself in relation to this play of temporality?

I don't know . . . Certainly, my work does not pursue history in the generic sense of the term, with a continuity, an evolution, the search for a succession, an origin for causes and effects. But all the same, it has a dimension that is not purely anecdotal; it is not a simple catalogue of modernity. It's quite different. Then perhaps I analyse this modernity in order to move beyond it—but then it's the same thing. It is the very effect of spiralling or doubling that I look for in modernity that ultimately brings me back to metaphysics. But then it is a question of a metaphysics resulting from this doubling of modernity, rather than from a history of metaphysics or Western millenarian thought. And we must put aside references if we want to describe this modernity in its effects of rupture and denial of the past. We must do the same with analysis: give the reference away, drop it! Not out of contempt, but in order to find, as Nietzsche would say, a radical *pathos*, a pure distance—not that distance of the critical gaze, not a negative distance, but a kind of pure distance. Only then does modernity appear in a different, more lively, more violent, and more radical light. It becomes

more interesting. This is why I find it more easily in the United States than in the history of European philosophy. I find the American situation more challenging, more exciting. But once this radical break is made, there is no reason why modernity in all its permutations and self-reflexivity couldn't refer to a metaphysical dimension, rather than a sociological one. Moreover, this metaphysics is part of the same process. It doesn't come from somewhere else.

When you suggest that the object's mode of disappearance has replaced its mode of production, it seems to me that you are really setting Nietzsche against Marx. It sounds to me a bit like the question of Nietzsche's eternal return. Do you see it in this way?

There is certainly an echo of Nietzsche here, if not a direct reference to him. I once read him avidly, but that was a long time ago. I haven't read him since. Suddenly I lost almost all interest in him. Sure, the theme of the eternal return was undoubtedly quite influential in a sense. But Nietzsche's influence on me could also be found, for example, in the use of *metamorphosis*: in the possibility of linking forms without cause or effect . . . or again, this possibility at the level of disappearance. Something that disappears without a trace, that erases its origin and its end, that is no longer caught up in linearity. Fundamentally, this passage to a state of disappearance is disappearance of the linear order, of the order of cause and effect. So when things disappear beneath the horizon of other things, they have the possibility of reappearing. A curvature indeed exists here that didn't exist in the previous order, and this certainly implies something like the *eternal return* in the Nietzschean sense. But there is ultimately a very powerful conjunction here, but linked to a rise in power. A rise in power operates within this cycle: it precisely occurs when it is able to transfigure values, which is to say when it has the power of disappearance, the power to make things disappear, and not simply the power to transform them. Yes, that's different. Here was an order truly opposed to the rest of modernity (historical, ideological, etc.), which was to come later. But that isn't a return to anything. In any event, perhaps it would be much more Hölderlin than Nietzsche . . .

Somewhere you oppose the attitude of Baudelaire to that of Benjamin, the 19th-century attitude to the nostalgia of the 20th-century.

But it's not at all an opposition that favours one over the other. Benjamin is someone whom I admire deeply. In addition, there is a striking similarity between the tonalities of both periods—a very original combination, in Benjamin as well as Adorno, of a sort of dialectics with

a presentiment of what is no longer dialectical: the system and its catastrophe. There is both dialectical nostalgia and something not at all dialectical, a profound melancholy. There is indeed a sort of testimony to the fatality of systems . . . I think that Baudelaire already saw modernity in somewhat the same terms. Yet on this point, it seemed to me that Baudelaire was less radical in an odd sort of way—the problem didn't present itself like that then—but that he perhaps already saw modernity with a fresher eye than Benjamin's, just as Benjamin saw it with a fresher eye than we do today! That is to say, the closer you are to the moment of rupture—

To the beginning?

Yes—the clearer you see things. I profoundly believe this. In practice, it is always true. The images are strong, either positive or negative, when things change. It is later on that they become blurred. This is quite evident at a psychological level. The same thing also happens in the analytic realm. Of course, Hegel had already foreshadowed this problem of art, of modern art, of the modernity of art, as well as the whole history of 'absolute merchandise' and all such practices . . . He was clearly aware of art as disappearance, as the magic of disappearance.

Perhaps this explains your interest in art. Somewhere you say that the practice of art is entirely taken up today with the magic of its disappearance.

Yes.

Is this the reason for your interest in art, however long-standing it may be?

Yes, but it's no longer my foremost interest. It's true that I haven't had much to do with it . . . I know many people, and I have experienced something here. But it would be correct to say that I am extremely interested in certain aspects of aesthetics in the true sense of the term, and particularly in the disappearance of the aesthetic dimension of the world. There is still an enormous stake in aesthetics: not aesthetics in the artistic sense, but as a mode of perception, which is precisely the art of appearance, the art of making things appear. Not creating them, but making them appear.

It is true that I have always been fascinated by this. But I'm not fascinated by the convolutions of modern art and all its competing movements. At one time I had a strong interest in Pop, and later in hyperrealism. But it was simply for analytical purposes, since art was

only one of many fields that allowed me to clearly illustrate a number of things. I was also fascinated by *trompe l'oeil*, particularly in relation to seduction. But the history of art as such doesn't interest me. My interest in art extends to its forms, its outpourings, and nothing more. As for this stake in aesthetics, it is really quite a tedious term. I rarely use it myself. And I think I actually avoid it, since it sounds so —

Aestheticising?

Yes, you can't escape it. If only the word could sound as it literally means.

As opposed to ethics or morality, perhaps? Then it would become more interesting. It is possible to interpret the negative reactions of the audience to your lecture in precisely this way . . .

Yes, I heard echoes of this. What do you think?

Indeed, I thought that the response of the audience was somewhat moralistic, whereas your discourse actually had more to do with aesthetics . . .

. . . aesthetics, of course. The first question was quite revealing on this point: 'OK, but isn't all this disappearance just so much fiction?' Because when the analytic disappears, wherever that may finally be, when it seeks its own disappearance by trying to give rise to an object that would have things to tell us, but without in any way being related to a subjective system of interpretation, then what else could it be if not narrative? Then we enter into aesthetics, in the purest sense of the term. I really think that narrative is where fatality can operate. Narrative retains a fatal character, ultimately . . . a (hi)story.

Then again, you say that perhaps theory would be the only fatal strategy.

Yes, theory, but as narrative, as spiral, as concatenation. It's true that the concepts I use are not exactly concepts. I wouldn't insist on their conceptual rigour: that would be far too constricting . . . You can play around with them. But that isn't frivolous or mundane; it is very serious in my opinion. It is the only possible way to account for the movement of things. Theory—and this is a rather paradoxical statement—then becomes fatal. It becomes an object.

When I say narrative, this doesn't necessarily imply a return to a form of fiction, although at times I would really love to. Besides, there are passages in the book . . .

In other words, you seems to be saying that theory ultimately has the right not to be true.

Absolutely, the right to play or to be radical. Thus theory can be narrative, but in a double sense of 'departures' from history. In the books I write there are always little stories, little digressions, but things which are often sites of emergence — events, pointed remarks, dream-like flashes of wit, or *witz* . . . I like the German term better, *trait d'esprit* is a bit of a mouthful. Finally, the trace [*trail*] if you like: not a meta-language organised around signs, but rather a sort of tracking shot along the line of traces. When this occurs there is no continuity as a rule, and everything begins to move quite quickly. There is no discursivity.

So I think that narrative can be valuable as form of theory. But here the aim is not exactly fiction as such. It was a good comment the other day, but a little tendentious because it ultimately came down to a question of literature. But that's not what I try to do. We need to have many ways of expressing theory—including philosophy, provided that philosophy can at the same time dismantle its own apparatus of words, concepts, etc. It could even be poetry, but not 'poetry-poetry' . . . not anymore.

Would it perhaps be something like a 'communicational aesthetic'? In the sense that you would propose, in contrast to Habermas' 'communicational ethic' based on a *rational consensus*, an aesthetic based on *conflict* and *seduction*?

Yes, the challenge and the duel . . . But I've always had a prejudice against the very word 'communication'. It's always seemed to me to be precisely something like an exchange, a dialogue, a system . . . I don't know . . . of contacts, and all the linguistic and metalinguistic functions therein implied. If that is communication, I don't want to know about it.

There was already something different involved in *L'Échange symbolique et la Mort* (1976). But this category of the symbolic became unworkable: there was too much confusion about the term. So I dropped it. In my opinion, the really interesting relations between people don't occur in the form of communication. Something else happens: a form of challenge, seduction, or play, which brings more intense things into being. By definition, communication simply brings about a relationship between things already in existence. It doesn't make things appear. And what is more, it tries to establish an equilibrium — the message and all that. Yet it seems to me that there is a more exciting way of making things appear: not exactly communication, but something more of the order of challenge. I'm not sure that this would involve an aesthetic of communication strictly speaking.

What I meant by a 'communicational aesthetic' is not an aesthetic of communication, but rather a means of recuperating the communicational via the aesthetic . . . or of rekindling it.

Yes, but the communicational process has always seemed to me a little too functional, a little too functionalist, as if the only true purpose of things was to —

Persuade?

Yes, that's right — as if things always exist in a relation of content, be it pedagogical or moral. I don't believe that the really important stakes exist at the level of communication.

On this topic, the 'reversibility of signs' which you oppose as a sort of strategy to the 'transgression of the Law' seems quite fundamental. I would like you to explain what you mean by it, because this is where criticism has seemed the most intense. People have seen much perversity in it.

Yes, perhaps because it sounds slightly immoral to them, because this reversibility seems to be associated with an ironic superiority. Still, reversibility is a very important theme in all mythologies — but not in modernity at all. We are the only ones who live in systems which don't operate according to reversibility and metamorphosis, but which are based instead on the irreversibility of time, of production, etc. So what really interests me is the fatal strategy somewhere behind this beautiful order of the irreversibility and finality of things, and which nonetheless undermines them.

I think what disturbs people is when reversibility is fixed as a kind of Law. But I don't see it that way. I see it as a rule of play, which is different. But wherever it is seen as a Law . . . yes, that fixes things. But it's not a law, since a law can be transgressed. I don't see how reversibility could be transgressed, which is tantamount to saying there is no transgression. The order of things is charged with reversibility — even though, of course, ethics and morality profoundly resist it sometimes, because there must always be progress. Such an irresponsible tone cannot be tolerated. Thus, in terms of the irreversibility of things, the fatal is always interpreted negatively.

This theme has become extremely important to me. A theory of reversibility was already present in *L'Échange symbolique et la Mort*: the idea that subject and object are not opposed to one another, that distinctive oppositions don't really exist — or rather, that they have no truly significant function — and that what has to be revealed is in fact the

reversibility of subject and object. Then these terms disappear as such, and they have to be put into another form of relationship . . . I have always preferred a radical antagonism between things. Then subject and object become irreconcilable, and cease to be dialectical. This is what the Principle of Evil means in *Les Stratégies fatales*: total irreconcilability and total reversibility at the same time. There is nevertheless a tension here in the opposition of these two things to the linear and the dialectical.

Thus, on the one hand, there is a radical antagonism — as Freud came to discover with his principles of Eros and Thanatos, and the impossibility of reconciling them. The two are not directly opposed to one another, which means that the first principle would account for all reconciliation, including the eventual reconciliation of both terms, while the second principle says no, Thanatos says no: Eros will never reconcile the world, and nothing can ever change that.

While we're on this topic, what do you think of the current interest in psychoanalysis?

Well, I've never really tackled the subject of psychoanalysis head on. At one time, I wanted to write a sort of 'mirror of desire' similar to *The Mirror of Production* (1973), to do a really critical job on it. But then I realised that it wasn't worth it. The situation had changed and a number of books had already been written — Deleuze et al. So I lost interest in that. Perhaps I felt it was too late, or that it didn't matter. Actually, there is something like a critique of this in *De la séduction* (1979), but without being directly critical or negative. You get nowhere by doing a critique of something, because this simply reinforces it. The book was immediately just a means of moving away from psychoanalysis.

So psychoanalysis became marginal to my interests, impractical, almost useless. But this would indeed amount to a radical critique, something of increasing importance for me.

Among other things, you accuse it of denying a second birth, initiation.

I know that seems simplistic to psychoanalysts. First, they see it as an attack, an aggression, which it isn't; and then they say, on rather superficial grounds, that 'psychoanalysis can easily do these kinds of things too'. And this is true, relatively speaking. In fact, I think that psychoanalysis is a quite enigmatic system of interpretation, and that in its better moments it manages to preserve something of this enigmatic character. But it is also a production machine, not at all a desiring machine — a machine which is entirely terrorising and terrorist. Yes, in

this respect, the more it disappears the better. I have to thank Lacan for this. I have always admired him: certainly not as the builder of psychoanalysis, but as its destroyer, while precisely appearing to do the opposite. It's a fine example of seduction, of diversion through excess. That gave me a lot of pleasure. But psychoanalysts are not very happy when they are confronted with such things. No, it doesn't go down well with them at all.

I'm not sure about the situation today. I don't know how it is here, but psychoanalytic discourse in France has almost completely lost its impact. It no longer has that omnipotent authority it once had.

Just like Marxism, and almost at the same time. There is a sort of correlation between Marxist and Freudian thought. There was even a period when attempts were made to couple the two types of thought.

Ah yes, the grand epoch leading up to the 1970s, when all of this came to a head . . . It was undoubtedly a sign that both had buggered off, and that it was only through their desperate copulation that the knack could be saved, each becoming the other's nagging child. It didn't last long, but here we return to something perhaps much more interesting, because that really represented the ideological apogee of both of them.

At a given moment, you oppose art to obscenity. You present art as being in a sense the antithesis of obscenity. You say that the false that shines with all the power of the true is art, and on the contrary that the true that shines with all the power of the false is obscenity. So I would like you to briefly explain what you mean by obscenity, as well as its relation to the game of art.

Perhaps it would all hinge on illusion. The attempt at that time was precisely to render the artistic enterprise as a form of illusion: not in the sense of trickery, but in the sense of bringing something into play, of creating a scene, a space, a game, and a rule of play. Ultimately, it is about inventing ways of making things appear and about surrounding them with a void, thus annihilating the whole process of cause and effect, because this process is decidedly anti-artistic. Illusion tries to uncover the linkages between forms, at the place where they come into connection on their own. Art starts at this point where forms connect themselves according to an internal rule of play, a rule which one is unaware of most of the time, which the artist senses, but which to my mind remains secret. For once this rule can become a kind of style or method, we know that the game is over, and generally very quickly.

Thus in my opinion art is about the power of illusion, whereas obscenity is about the power of dis-illusion and objectivity. Obscenity is

objectivity, in the sense of making visible. It is the bias of realism to make things visible as they are, to attempt to expose them, and ultimately to destroy all their illusory and playful overtones—as if to say: ‘Here they are, they exist, they are incontestable!’ Finally, all one is left with is the terror of the visible. That’s obscenity. On the other hand, the only thing that enables play is art . . . even though this term is a bit vague, but it’s all we’ve got. We are caught in a desperate system, be it the social or whatever, where people no longer know how to play, or don’t even want to play. This is exactly why everyone is now busily reinventing communication.

But to my mind, art isn’t about communication. It is really about seduction, about provocation. In other words, aesthetic pleasure has nothing to do with the pleasure of contemplation, or even with spectacle. Indeed, art is something of a gamble, in answer to a sort of challenge. Things change instantaneously with a sort of immanence of forms. The subject gets drawn into this game as well. Of course, art is always illusion, but illusion as the power to overcome the subject’s defenses, its systems of causality. And then all of a sudden it shines with the power of . . . I did say the true, but while this formula is OK, even here we shouldn’t be too quick to—

Fix things?

In other words there is a general rule here, which art understands, contrary to, shall we say, ‘obscene’ processes. Of course, it may very well involve entirely material processes of production, interpretation, explication, etc. But when I say that the false shines with the power of the true, I mean that the true, since we seem to imbue it with a kind of halo, can never be found by seeking it. The only strategy is to do the reverse! You can only attain the true or the beautiful—if they are to be the criteria of accomplishment—by going precisely in the opposite direction. All these things are very important in Eastern philosophies. One shouldn’t make too much of that, but it nonetheless remains true. It is really quite misguided to hope to find the truth by seeking it . . . such is our morality. Fortunately, art is not so misguided. It knows full well that illusion is the only way to find anything, for if something is to be found—but ‘found’ without being sought—this can only really occur by the alternate route of something else. That’s absolutely essential.

This was the direction I took in regard to the social, because the way we envisage it is terribly misguided—as is the case with *socialism*, which proposes (if not perversely, then unintelligently) that the social can be realised straightforwardly. But things never present themselves in a

straight line, leading from beginning to end. Fortunately, things are much more subtle. Here again, it is the revenge of the object. Art is certainly one of the processes capable of taking this alternate route . . . of course, when it succeeds.

Throughout this discussion of art and obscenity, you specifically refer to a phenomenon which you identify as the disappearance of the scene of representation. What exactly is this according to you?

There's no mystery here — perhaps a secret somewhere, but no mystery. The scene is about the possibility of creating a space where things have the capacity to transform themselves, to perform in a different way, and not in terms of their objective purpose. It all comes down to this: altering space so as to turn it, as opposed to that other space without limits, into a space with limits, with a rule of play, an arbitrariness. Basically, the scene is about the arbitrary, which makes no sense in terms of normal space. This notion of the scene does not exist in certain cultures: the scene is unrepresentable. It was necessary to create this sort of minor miracle, this particular, quite specific, and to my mind, highly initiatory space. There is a secret in this, in the very existence of the scene; and I think a large part of its pleasure derives from this fact, from this perfectly arbitrary redirection. As with all games, pleasure is of the moment: a kind of territory is quite arbitrarily carved out, where there is the possibility of acting in any way whatsoever, in different ways, and where one is outside the real, outside the narrow constraints of conventional realist space.

So the scene was an invention. I don't know how it first occurred. Was it first conceptual, then theatrical, before it became the scene of the social? All the systems of representation, including that of the body, have secreted their scene. And perhaps what is lost today is the very possibility of inventing this kind of enchanted space, but also space as distance, and of playing upon this distance. But with the irruption of obscenity, the scene is lost. Obscenity doesn't have this arbitrary character: on the contrary, it always gives reasons for everything. It gives too many of them. It destroys that distance. It is the monstrous proximity of things: it loses that distance of the gaze, that play of distance. Obscenity no longer recognises rules, it conflates everything — it's the total promiscuity of things, the confusion of orders. It puts an end to those careful distinctions that all systems of ritual have maintained in order to avoid this obscenity of things, this total mental disorder, this shortcircuiting of the human into the inhuman. But here too, obscenity is more a qualifier than a concept, a sort of tonality if you

like. More significantly, it actually corresponds to something that is difficult to analyse other than in terms of the loss of the scene. And it's true that one has the impression of something being lost here. All the same, one shouldn't go too far in this direction. Obscenity is another dimension. Perhaps we'll have to face up to this hypervisible dimension, and then that might open up other possibilities for play. I don't know. At a certain moment, representation became one of these possibilities for play – though it has never been played in the same way. This is quite evident in the art of the Renaissance, in its use of figurative space. When art was invented as representation, its treatment in the beginning was quite ecstatic, not at all representational or economical, which is what happened later on.

But then, I could be wrong. Every change of rules ought to bring about other possibilities for play, other ways of playing in these interstitial spaces. It will be interesting to see what happens in years to come, in response to the expansion of this cybernetic, telematic world and all its gadgets. Are people going to discover scenes or fragments of scenes in totally unexpected places? We should not assume that this system is fatal in the negative sense of the term, such as 'nothing can be done about it', etc. Of course, here we're dealing with a very powerful force that destroys illusion, that ensures this is a world without illusion in two senses: namely, that it has become disillusioned as well as having lost the ability to create illusions or a kind of secret – whereas in fact this power of illusion, this violent denial of the real existed in all ancient religions, cultures or mythologies, or even in the traditional order. This power was crucial for early religions. The religious experience has always been about a denial of the real, something like a radical doubt – the idea that what is essential happens elsewhere. And this is undoubtedly now being lost, is slowly disappearing, released from the workings of the world: the idea that the world is real and that all we have to do is operate it. Our world is no longer even utopian. There is no utopia anywhere. The scene for Utopia no longer exists. This was also a scene. So Utopia has now entered the real, and here we are.

Is this why theory should be radical rather than true?

Yes, certainly. Radicality is not a truth truer than what has been said before. It is about displacement, something that precisely brings into question our old objectives of revolution in the subversive sense. But radicality has changed, it no longer means that. It doesn't have to be the subversion of a system through negativity. Perhaps it really involves illusion, or rediscovering the sovereignty of illusion, of distance.

At the conference you remarked that you have now shifted from a logic of distinction to a logic of seduction. Distinction is a bit like what Bourdieu does, and what he's done for a very long time . . .

Yes, nothing has changed in fifteen years.

But you've done it yourself . . .

Indeed I have. I started out doing that. I was a good sociologist, no doubt about it. And after all, sociology has always had the virtue of being a way of reading things. But it became a kind of stereotype, an analysis for which you have to produce facts. Then, what's the use of producing facts? I found Bourdieu's work to be very strong at one time, but that was long ago. And then after a certain point, I didn't! This sort of conformity to facts, this compliance with truth is clearly never going to contest anything because all it does is constantly verify itself—a tautology which moreover can be found in the very form of Bourdieu's discourse. It would be true to say that I have completely moved away from this logic of differentiation or distinction, which in any case only interested me at an anthropological level.

And maybe at the level of irony? Because it seems that right from the start this type of sociology contained something truly ironic.

Yes, in relation to Marxism and all that. This sociology had an impact during the period of ideological upheaval. But then it turned sour. All of a sudden, this talk about culture and differentiation was met with: 'But then, what about class? Whatever became of class logic?' So there was a great clash. But all of this happened before 1968. When Bourdieu brought out his *La Reproduction* in 1970, it was almost too late to enter into this discussion again. The book was already an auto-reproduction of itself, which meant that what he described immediately undermined his own position. But ultimately you can't really criticise him for that. What is curious is that such things come back into fashion. They were actually taken up again very seriously in a revised form (and here we again find a type of simulation), because they'd had their hour of truth, so to speak, in the 1960s, and because what happened after 1968 largely diminished their importance. And behold!, after this great coup the same conjuring tricks return, without having budged an inch. This type of 'rewriting' doesn't interest me. But that's sociology: a kind of permanent recurrence. And behold!, at the low point of this intellectual stagnation, at the ebbtide of this historical moment, such systems of thought come back as convenient platforms, as last resorts.

Your relation to fashion seems highly ambiguous: it is not critical, but nor is it collusive. But it is ultimately difficult to know what your position is.

There is a problem about my position in general. My treatment of fashion is an ideal measure of this, because in so-called radical or leftist thought there is a denial or critique of fashion as immoral, as counter-revolutionary. I have lived with this for a long time. In fact, when I described objects my denegation of them was almost a moral one, based on the idea of an ideal alternative. It was a widely-held belief at the time. But things have changed, and it is no longer tenable. There is the feeling today that negation or critique is no longer an effective optic for analysing fashion, advertising, or television. This raises a very general problem, the same one that the present socialist regime raises for us. Where can one now situate oneself in relation to these things? Is it that one has lost all possibility of speaking out against them in a credible manner? In a certain sense, a margin of credibility no longer exists. There has been an absorption of things. How is one able to envisage such things, as you said, without entering into total collusion with them? Thus one would have to develop a new perception that is not a capitulation such as: 'But of course, fashion is resistant to that, because a part of it really has something to say. Everybody watches television, and even we watch it ourselves: you learn to live with it.' You have to draw a line at some point, because we all live in the same world! And some of the new generation approach things with this frame of mind. They get on with it, and formulate a new morality for social action. I don't happen to go that far myself, nor have I a desire to do so. But on the other hand, it's true that the whole leftist, revolutionary and moralistic position of the 1970s is finished. Speaking for myself, at the moment I don't see any new, original, or credible position. It's a real problem.

At the political level?

Exactly. For me, it is not a question of expediency, of denial, passivity, or a disillusioned retreat. It's just that I don't know what type of distance to adopt right now. That all came to an end with the journals, the first being a small radical review of the situationist type called *Utopie*. Then we knew what had to be done: the Other, Society and Power, they were on the other side. We knew that somewhere there existed, if not exactly a public, then at least a movement to be addressed. Everything was relatively straightforward. But with the appearance of the Giscardian type of liberalism in 1975-76, it suddenly became evident that these small journals were doomed because they no longer had anything

to say that mattered. As far as I can remember, *Traverses* appeared at this time: it was no longer about transgression, but a sort of transversality, with the aim of discovering a different, more interstitial, more fluid type of negativity, both inside and outside the institution. Of course, in a very real sense, *Traverses* is both Beaubourg and anti-Beaubourg, or culturally different from Beaubourg. So there was a trade-off between collusion and something that still preserved a sort of scene, a public, etc. But to my mind, even the position of *Traverses* is untenable today. It's finished as well.

In what sense?

In the sense that a political ultimatum was delivered to the journal, via Beaubourg, to socialise itself, to become a 'social' review, to take the demands of the people into account, and to stop being a kind of intellectual review. It was a very difficult situation. The journal was almost forced to disappear by order of the socialists themselves. It was a good opportunity for them to turn it into a socialist review, as if to say: 'Intelligence and Power, you are ours!' It was an attempt to synergise things, even though this happens of its own accord. We tried to make them understand. But they didn't want to understand. The matter was put aside because they had other fish to fry. That time we survived, but in the knowledge that we no longer had any margin of autonomy, not even a liberal one.

So *Utopie* is finished; and in my opinion, *Traverses* is virtually finished. Of course, it will keep going for a little while yet. But things always outlive their usefulness. So what else can be done now? What other distance can be maintained in relation to this new society which has absorbed these margins, but which in other respects couldn't give a damn about marginal or-heretical products? It doesn't want them but crews them all the same. It is impossible now to find a subversive position. It no longer means anything. All this is a very general problem. The same thing applies to fashion. Everything about it is fascinating, but can't be evaluated because we no longer have any criteria for this. It exists, it is immanent, but nevertheless engages many things. It is even a passion. It is not frivolous or meaningless. But analysis no longer has a privileged position in relation to fashion. Faced with the loss of this privileged position for analysis and the critical gaze, what can be substituted for it now? That's the problem.

You first analysed fashion as a system of social differentiation, as a means for people to distinguish among themselves. But do you now want to see it as a fatal power, as a

power of distinction in relation to nature, or really as a game with nature, as an affirmation of the ability of humans to distinguish themselves from nature . . . to produce their culture?

Yes, to produce artifice, or to give credence to it as a sort of truth. When things become indistinguishable from nature or the real, they are simply obscene. Everything consists of artifice, of the potential to become artificial—but in the Baudelairian, and not moral or pejorative, sense. I need to know that artifice exists. That is what is at stake. And fashion is an extremely powerful way of turning the body into a denial of its sexual, physiological, and functional reality. It is ultimately a sublime game of the body, for without it the body would clearly be pornographic: fashion is the absolute antithesis of pornography. Fashion ceases to exist as soon as a glimmer of—I would say truth—arises from the depths of the body. When the body is turned into a kind of obscenity, into the pure demand for sex, it's finished. Fashion has to continually play around this, but it should never overstep the bounds. It is entitled to be erotic, but never obscene.

What is inherently interesting about fashion is its extreme ambiguity. So it can epitomise, or illustrate, a more general condition. Not only does it continually adjust itself to reality, but it always remains an enigma. This is why it is extremely interesting.

Does your interest in fashion indicate perhaps a displacement from the nature of the political . . . towards culture?

Yes, my interest in things is not so much geared towards banal scenes. The scenes of the political and the social have become banal. Basically, we can only take part in the extension of this banality, in the adaptation and general redeployment of all these sorts of things. It seems that the whole paralysing effect of the political apparatus, as a form of revolution now as in the future, has totally lost its edge, has been eroded, and that the centres of interest can easily slide over things no longer at the front of the stage. For political ideology, of the right or the left, will still continue to occupy the front of the stage, but a false stage—this would be a system of simulation. A critique of the political is no longer worth the effort today. Let's move on, let's see what happens elsewhere.

NOTES

1. Jean Baudrillard, *Les Stratégies fatales*, Paris, Grasset, 1983, p. 12. [Marie Dorval was a famous stage actress in France during the early 19th-century.]
2. *ibid.*, p. 263.
3. Of course, the reference is to Jacques Lacan.