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Baudrillard, Žižek, and the Seduction of Christ

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Introduction

Both Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek have produced work which retains a post-Marxist commitment to a political critique of the economy and articulates the conditions under which such a critique can or cannot take place. Moreover, both make what might be broadly called the 'post-secular' turn in as much as both refuse a positivist critique of religion (in the case and Baudrillard) or Christianity (in the case of Žižek). Yet it is this specific difference between the anthropological approach of Baudrillard and the theological approach of Žižek I wish to explore. I begin by introducing Baudrillard's development of post-Marxist critique within the context of semiotics and the simulacra. In both cases I situate his work in relation to Lacan. I then look specifically at the modes of political resistance Baudrillard draws upon, principally 'symbolic-exchange' (the anthropological) and 'seduction' (the psychological). I then turn to explore the place religion holds for him in the above regard. As I argue, while symbolic exchange and seduction easily translate into

Žižek's theology Baudrillard fails to appreciate the 'exceptional' nature of Christianity over and against the broader primitive forms of sacrificial religion he draws upon in pursuit of critique. This however is not to argue for the superiority of Žižek's work. Žižek's ambiguous stance with regard to actual Christianity renders his work less a break with Baudrillard than an example of seduction, an ironic strategy in the tradition *of* Baudrillard. In the final analysis I turn to Kierkegaard to help situate their work *qua* theology, offering a theological perspective on their respective differences.[1]

Baudrillard's post-Marxist Critique

Baudrillard's initial contention with Marxism can be framed in terms of the problem that while the imperative for a political critique of the economy remains, the conditions under which critique can take place have all but vanished in the transition from mass production to mass consumerism. As Baudrillard says, "freedom understood as public action, as the collective discourse of a society on its own undertakings and values, has in fact disappeared in the individual liberation of mores." (Baudrillard 1988: 83) For Baudrillard "the social order is contracting to include only economic exchange. […] There are therefore none of the elements here for a future revolution." (Baudrillard 1988: 109)

Marx's analysis of *Capital* was predicated on the distinction drawn between an object or a labourer's use-value, and it/his/her exchange value. Where the latter exceeds the former a space is opened up for exploitation and alienation. Yet as Baudrillard points out, there remains within Marx's thought an element of "idealist anthropology" at the level of needs: use-vale is "grounded anthropologically in the (self-) 'evidence' of naturalness, in an unsurpassable original reference." (Baudrillard 1981:139) Yet the aim of critique is not simply to highlight the way a given need can be shown to be the fruit of production (as if a natural need pre-existed such a system), rather "*the system of needs* is *the product of the system of production*"; i.e. needs are not produced on an individual basis but as a force of consumption (Baudrillard 1998: 42).

For this reason Baudrillard turned to semiotics arguing that the political critique of the economy should begin not with the classical Marxist category of use-

[1] I would like to offer my thanks to the insightful comments provided by the IJZS reader and incorporated into this text.

value but sign-value. This is not to say that Baudrillard was not critical of semiotics and structuralism. If Saussure's initial insight was that both the signifier and signified were arbitrary so that what counts as value is not some universal concept but the articulation of a sign within a system of differences, then Baudrillard claims Saussure does not go far enough. To a large extent this is what concretizes Baudrillard's position as a postmodernist, so while the outcome of his work is radically different, his approach, broadly speaking, begins from the same premise as his contemporaries Derrida and Foucault (i.e. postmodernism is an implicit or explicit critique of Saussure).

According to Baudrillard the structuralist theory of the sign merely repeats the relation between use-value and exchange-value: in the same way that use-value guarantees exchange-values, the signified can be said to underpin the signifier:

> The abstraction of the exchange value system is sustained by the effect of concrete reality and of objective purpose exhaled by use value and needs. This is the strategic logic of the commodity; its second term acts as the satellite and alibi for the first. The present hypothesis is that the same analysis holds true for the logic and strategy of the sign, thus exploding the "scientific postulates" of semio-linguistics — the arbitrary character of the sign in particular, as originally defined by Saussure and modified by Benveniste. (Baudrillard 1998: 81)

Hence, like the commodity which requires an abstract principle of equivalence to ensure the basis of utility (i.e. money), so to, Saussure retains "the principle of equivalence between signifier and signified" (Baudrillard 1998: 81). What structuralism fails to take account of Baudrillard argues is the more radical view that now there are only signifiers which bear no relation to any meaning *per se*.

By way of example it is helpful here to situate Baudrillard within the wave of poststructuralists and in particular Lacan's critique of structuralism. According to Lacan, Saussure's theory failed to "jettison the illusion that the signifier serves [*répond à*] the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to justify [*répondre de*] its existence in terms of any signification whatsoever" (Lacan 2002: 142). Lacan's concern was that Saussure's presentation of the sign remained implicitly predicated upon the assumption that the function of language was still to represent. By contrast, Lacan, while accepting the premises of structuralism argued more rigorously that language is a "closed order" [*ordre fermé*] (Lacan 2002: 144), a differentiated totality that imposes order on life: "We can take things no further along

this path than to demonstrate that no signification can be sustained except by reference to another signification" (Lacan 2002: 141). So instead of conceiving of a signifier representing a thing, Lacan claimed that the signifier merely provides access to the differential system of language: meaning is produced from difference alone. In Lacan's reworking of the Saussure's sign, language is characterised by the "incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (Lacan 2002: 145).

Because sign-value begins to transgress the classical model of exchange-value and use-value, all commodities for Baudrillard become a mere image as signs proliferate and we no longer take 'needs' from some supposed natural origins: all signs fall prey to ideology.

Returning then to Baudrillard's initial concern: what remains of critique given the shifting cultural conditions? Baudrillard's critique of structuralism allows him to articulate a new critical phase of the image, representation and equivalence, within the advanced stage of consumerism which he situates within what he calls the "Precession of the Simulacra" (Baudrillard 1994: 1-43). The Precession is a history of sorts that recalls for Baudrillard the words of Elias Canetti: "past a certain point in time, history has not been real. Without realising it, the whole human race seems to have suddenly left reality behind." (Baudrillard 1999: 14) For Baudrillard life is a simulacrum which with the accompanying digitalisation allows a form of reality to emerge that is no longer rooted in any sense of the real but the hyper-real, the more real than real by virtue precisely of its artificiality.

In *Simulacra and Simulation* Nietzsche's 'How the Real World became a Myth: the History of an Error' (Nietzsche 1998: 20) serves as the template for the precession. Indeed, in the same way Lacan 'repeated' Freud (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term),[2] rewriting Freud on the basis of structural linguistics, it might be argued that Baudrillard repeats Nietzsche, reworking the myth on the basis of semiotics. Or to put the matter is more directly in terms of Nietzsche, Baudrillard's 'precession of the simulacra' testifies to Nietzsche's 'eternal return' as it appears within metaphysics and the history of ideas.

The error in question is metaphysics as it relates to the philosophical distinction traditionally drawn between the real world (i.e. the super-sensible world of

[2] Kierkegaard's understanding of repetition is fashioned by the logic of difference rather than identity. The only thing one can really repeat verbatim is the impossibility of repetition; however one can repeat an event by articulating the difference the initial even created. See Kierkegaard, *Repetition*.

Ideas) and the apparent world (i.e. our contingent material world). Nietzsche's 'history' charts the fate of Truth from Plato, through Christianity to positivism. Each turn of the screw along philosophy's path see the Idea slowly removed from any anchorage in the ground of Truth. What remains then when the so-called 'real world' loses all purchase on our apparent world? Nietzsche's answer is: "in abolishing the true world we also have abolished the apparent one" (Nietzsche 2007: 20). That is to say, once we lose the metaphysical plane as it pertains to the distinction real/apparent we lose the meaningfulness of the very distinction itself; representation is unmoored leaving our attempts to account for the world adrift; one's sense of reality can be neither reduced to materialism nor can it be elevated in terms of idealism; we enter the postmodern, this is the order of the simulacra: "The simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true." (Baudrillard 1994: 1)

On way to understand Baudrillard's anti-metaphysical thrust is in terms of Lacan's critique of courtly love. According to Lacan the rules established in the chivalric literature on courtly love which grew out of *Provance* in southern France in the late middle-ages were devised not so much to prevent or obfuscate the attainment of the love object, rather the very rules were created to mask the fact that there is no object to obtain anyway: "the inaccessibility of the object is posited as a point of departure" (Lacan 1992: 149). For Lacan courtly love engages the symbolic mode, it is "a poetic exercise, a way of playing with a number of conventional, idealizing themes, which couldn't have any real concrete equivalent" (Lacan 1992: 148). The simulacra is a chivalric play that takes us culturally into the post-metaphysical era of the non-All.

Yet if the post-metaphysical implies as both Nietzsche and Heidegger argued, the 'death of God' Baudrillard appears to push the logic a little further. As Andrew Wernick has highlighted, the precession of the simulacra amounts to the second death of God. In the initial death of God, what dies is the God of metaphysics or to draw upon Heidegger the God of onto-theology (Heidegger 1969: 58-62) – what Lacan called the Big Other who guarantees the meaningfulness of the world as a whole. Yet arguably this first death of God is not his death as such, rather, God's negation merely allows those self-same predicates of God to be transposed onto the social in the manner of Feuerbach. With the precession of the simulacra however the very impossibility of the social existing undermines God's last refuge. Or, with the

eclipse of the social by hyper-reality we encounter the second death of God, i.e. the very impossibility of a site for any such reception of God. This is Baudrillard's nihilism: once the "wager of representation" – that a sign refers to a depth of meaning guaranteed by God – no longer stands, God appears as nothing more than a sign among signs and the whole system becomes weightless (Baudrillard: 1994, 4).

Baudrillard and Resistance

What becomes then of social critique and the possibility thereof? Despite Baudrillard's nihilism the study of religion plays a significant role for him as it did a generation of French theorists who entertained surrealism. Resistance is channelled through two key theoretical traditions, the first anthropological and the second psychological. In regard of the first Baudrillard draws on an established line of thought which developed through French anthropology, starting with Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, continuing with Marcel Mauss's *The Gift: the Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, and exploding in George Bataille's *The Accursed Share*. Each one collectively contributes to what Baudrillard calls 'symbolic exchange'.

Modern culture, Baudrillard argued, was characterised by utilitarian forms of exchange which presuppose a culture of production geared towards an economy of the sign. Symbolic exchange stands in contrast to utilitarian forms of exchange in two key ways. First, as it was for Mauss, symbolic exchange is potlatch, the Native American custom of giving away wealth in order to enhance one's status rather than in accordance with any rational economic logic. In this regard Baudrillard also draws on Bataille's "general economy", an economy not predicted upon scarcity – what Bataille called a "restricted economy" but a "wasteful expenditure" (Bataille 1989: 25), the key component within primitive culture.

Second, alongside the privilege of excess Baudrillard also highlighted the centrality of 'reciprocity', i.e. gift-exchange. For Baudrillard gift-exchange implies at once a "continuous unlimited reciprocity" (Baudrillard 1981: 79) which stands in contrast to the prevailing readings of gift found in Derrida for example in which a gift is only deemed 'pure' to the extent it is given without reciprocity, a pure expenditure as such. Rather, as Baudrillard says: "The gift is our myth, the idealist myth correlative to our materialist myth, and we bury the primitives under both myths at the same time. The primitive symbolic process knows nothing of the gratuity of the gift, it knows only the challenge and the reversibility of exchanges" (Baudrillard 1993: 48-9).

In this reversibility lies sacrifice. The giver of the symbolic gift "must divest himself as if of part of himself – an act which is significant in itself as the basis, simultaneously, of both the mutual presence of the terms of the relations, and their mutual absence." (Baudrillard 1993: 66)

Taken together, Baudrillard asks us to think gift as the moment of intervention, of excess to the given order, which works to establish symbolic exchange, or put the other way round, it charts the shift in Baudrillard's thought from thinking of symbolic change as community and hence counter to consumerism, to the need for a more radical intervention, a *point* of irruption: the counter-gift. Gift

therefore does not so much attack the system as recall the origins of the economic order thereby working as an imaginative counterpart to modern utility, opening up the possibility of an alternate economic order.

Seduction

If symbolic exchange is the privileged metaphor for an 'anti-economy', the strategic means by which one articulates critique takes the form of 'seduction'. That is to say, seduction serves as a form of social critique, one of Baudrillard's 'ironic strategies'. As Stuart Kendall has argued, Baudrillard's use of the term is indebted to Kierkegaard's aesthetic pseudonym Johannes the Seducer, whose diary of seduction forms part of the aesthetic outlook in the first half of *Either/Or* (Kendall 2011: 1-16). The text establishes a dramatic tension between the characters types portrayed in the book, especially between the aesthetic characters in Part One and the ethical character who dominates Part Two. The book employs Kierkegaard's 'indirect method' – forcing the reader to choose between either the aesthetic or ethical path, with the religious category as the implicit third choice. Yet Kierkegaard remains a critical force for Baudrillard more generally and not just Kierkegaard's ironic strategies. As Kierkegaard highlighted some 130 years in advance of Baudrillard, "a revolutionary age is an age of action; ours is the age of advertisement and publicity. Nothing ever happens but there is immediate publicity everywhere." (Kierkegaard 1977: 35) In the same way, Baudrillard's diagnosis of the modern ills highlights the way technological and digitalised communication (i.e. hyper-reality) precludes the possibility symbolic exchange and hence any real sense of meaningful communication.

Within the milieu of French post-structuralism the strategic significance of 'seduction' as a critical tool is to be found in the way it addressed many of the critical concerns of the day. First, it addressed Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976). For Foucault sexuality was constructed through the discourse of power and hence the site of political resistance. Yet in relativizing all sexual truth through power Foucault raised power to the status of truth, and hence "Foucault's discourse is a mirror of the powers it describes." (Baudrillard 2007: 30) What Foucault failed to take account of was that power is precisely the power of appearance and what matters is not the disclosure of power through discourse but the truth of its simulation: seduction. Baudrillard's nihilism therefore goes beyond Foucault: despite Foucault's insistence

on the contingency of discourse, discourse remains grounded in truth, in contrast, there is no truth in signification for Baudrillard.

Likewise, while Deleuze's 'deterritorialization' seeks to critically address capitalism, "This compulsion toward liquidity, flow, and an accelerated circulation of what is psychic, sexual, or pertaining to the body is the exact replica of the force which rules market value: […]It is the form of capital." (Baudrillard 2007: 39-40) In other words, Baudrillard reduces Deleuze to his own language, making his theory just text/writing, and therefore the seduction of bodily metaphor.

Finally seduction addressed third-wave feminism and in particular Luce Irigaray. Irigaray's valorisation of the female sexual organ Baudrillard argued should be contextualised by the more pervasive cultural rise of pornography:

> The promotion of the female as a sex in its own right at the expense of the female as a principle of uncertainty. All sexual liberation lies in this strategy: the imposition of the rights, status and pleasure of women. The over-exposing and staging of the female as sex, and of the orgasm as the repeated proof of sex. Pornography states this clearly. (Baudrillard 1990: 20)

Seduction, like symbolic exchange, is irreducible to the modern logic of production; seduction is a play of artifice with the aim of provocation rather than production: "Seduction is that which is everywhere and always opposed to production. Seduction withdraws something from the visible order and so runs counter to production, whose project is to set everything up in clear view, whether it be an object, a number, or a concept." (Baudrillard 2007: 37)

As Kendall points out, if a sign is overt it becomes pornography, yet if it remains too obscure it will fail to seduce (Kendall 2011: 11). Thus it can be said, taken aesthetically, seduction exploits the role of incongruity in the function comedy in the direction of a critical intervention. Consider for example Baudrillard's account of laughter:

> "When we laugh or enjoy, it is because, in one way or another, a twisting or distortion of the signifier or energy has managed to create a void. Thus the story of someone who loses his key in a dark alley and is looking for it under the street light, because this is the only chance he has of finding it. […]: the void of logical reason is reduplicated exactly in order to be destroyed, and it is in the void thus created that the laugh and enjoyment burst out. (Baudrillard 1993: 232).

> The flash of wit or the funny story are like symbolic goods, like champagne […]. The *Witz* provokes laughter, or the reciprocity of another funny story, or even a veritable potlach of stories in succession. […] The *Witz* is necessarily inscribed in a symbolic exchange because it si bound to symbolic (rather than an economic) mode of enjoyment […] It is because the terms are symbolically exchanged, that is to say become reversible and are cancelled in their operations, that the poetic and the *Witz* institute a social relation of the same type. Only subjects disposed of their identity, like words, are devoted to social reciprocity. (Baudrillard 1993: 232-233)

As the above quotes highlight, the use of *witz* subverts social expectation and initiates a social relation, thereby becoming the mode of social critique par-excellence and giving credence to the association of postmodernity with comedy, play and artifice (as opposed to the rationalist endeavour of modernity).

It is a short step from this appreciation of the seduction *qua* symbolic exchange to Baudrillard's 'theological turn'. Seduction *qua* symbolic exchange invokes the idea of sacrifice: to be seduced is to negate oneself and hence sacrifice oneself. And like Durkheim and Bataille (of whom Satre would call a *nouveau mystique*) (Ward 1998: 3) Baudrillard associate sacrifice with the sacred, hence the *witz* of seduction becomes a *qua*si-religious category:

> What is involved here is an undertaking that Artaud would have , termed metaphysical : a sacrificial challenge to the world to exist. For nothing exists naturally, things exist because challenged, and because summoned to respond to that challenge. It is by being challenged that the powers of the world, *including the gods*, are aroused; it is by challenging these powers that they are exorcized, seduced and captured; it is by the challenge that the game and its rules are resurrected. (Baudrillard 1990: 91. Italics mine)

Baudrillard and Religion

Perhaps because Baudrillard has already conceded our cultural condition to the simulacra and hence the impossibility of returning to classical philosophy, German idealism or otherwise, he sees little value in developing or engaging metaphysics and ontology in the traditional philosophical sense of the terms. Instead he adopts Alfred Jarry's science of pataphysics (Baudrillard 1999: 14). Jarry defined pataphysics as: "the science of the realm beyond metaphysics… It will study the laws which govern exceptions and will explain the universe supplementary to this one; or, less ambitiously, it will describe a universe which one can see — must see perhaps — instead of the traditional one." (Jarry 1963: 131-151) Hence Baudrillard's

challenge above: to *seduce the gods*. In short, Baudrillard's religious turn was part of a wider ironic strategy to seduce the gods into existence and recall an alternative mode of symbolic exchange, even if the question of which gods remains uncertain. His aim was not to recover some objective reality or a return to *lebens* but to pose nonetheless the possibility of another mode of exchange. Perhaps like Bataille he feared that "if man surrendered unreservedly to immanence, he would fall short of humanity" (Bataille 1989: 53)?

But the question remains: which gods to seduce? Christianity plays a marginal role in his thought. Baudrillard sided with the Jesuits in as much as they acknowledged the strength of the icon worships, who he saw as recognising in advance the precession of the simulacra:

> One can see that the iconoclasts, whom one accuses of disdaining and negating images, were those who accorded them their true value, in contrast to the iconolaters who only saw reflections in them and were content to venerate a filigree God. On the other hand, one can say that the icon worshipers were the most modern minds, the most adventurous, because, in the guise of having God become apparent in the mirror of images, they were already enacting his death and his disappearance in the epiphany of his representations (which, perhaps, they already knew no longer represented anything, that they were purely a game, but that it was therein the great game lay - knowing also that it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them).
>
> This was the approach of the Jesuits, who founded their politics on the virtual disappearance of God and on the worldly and spectacular manipulation of consciences -the evanescence of God in the epiphany of power - the end of transcendence, which now only serves as an alibi for a strategy altogether free of influences and signs. Behind the baroqueness of images hides the *éminence grise* of politics. (Baudrillard 1994: 5)

At times Baudrillard appears to want to seduce the gnostic god. Working on the assumption of a dualist approach he invoked the Manichean principle of an evil god. Baudrillard appears to admire the way evil, like seduction, can induce a sudden reversal in the dynamics of a situation: the principle of evil "consists in the diverting of things from their 'objective' existence, in their reversal, their 'return'." (Baudrillard 2005: 159) Yet he pulled back from asserting the objective existence of evil: "Above all, we must not confuse the idea of evil with some kind of objective existence of evil. That has no more meaning than an objective existence of the Real", (Baudrillard 2005: 159) And as both Wernick and Walters both agree, the invocation of the

principle of evil remains a rhetorical moment prior to the genuine reciprocity which underlies his theory of symbolic exchange. (Walters 2012: 100; Wernick 1998: 359)

However**,** as Chris Turner points out, as Baudrillard's critique of production and consumerism becomes ever more radical so too does his sense that the world of advertising will absorb all hope of an alternative social understanding. We live as it were beyond the end of history in which "things have no origin any longer and no end, they cannot develop logically or dialectically any more, but only chaotically or randomly." (Baudrillard 2005: 8-9). Little wonder the capricious pagan gods speak more into our postmodern condition than the servant king.

Perhaps for this reason Baudrillard identified much more radically and simply as a nihilist rather than an atheist. Where the latter position, exemplified by Nietzsche leaves room for human solace to be found in the will, for Baudrillard even this last refuge has been rendered void as the site of subjectivity is merely the concatenation of signifiers alone.

Or perhaps the 'social understanding' is precisely this, that all things must now exist alongside one another within the postmodern/postsecular without necessary contradiction. Seen from this perspective Baudrillard's nihilism could itself be seduction, masking the meaningfulness of this context in which all is contingent. Through a return to the 'pagan gods' we now free of the 'servant king' and therefore a sense of agency or will remains within the horizon of his work? Either way, Baudrillard's nihilism is at stark contrast with the almost optimistic atheism of Žižek to which I shall now turn.

Žižek

Given what has been said thus far it should not be difficult to appreciate the basic synergy of Baudrillard and Žižek's thought. First, both retain a commitment to a political critique of the economy and in doing so confront the post-Marxist dilemma regarding the means or site of critique. Second, both assume the linguistic turn and the radicalisation of Saussure's structuralism. Baudrillard radicalised the Saussure's sign in the direction of a semiotic analysis which takes into account the shift in production to a sign economy; Žižek radicalises the sign *qua* Marx in the direction of surplus-enjoyment, developing enjoyment as a social category of/for critique more generally. Third, both employ an ironic strategy which owes something to

Kierkegaard (as I shall argue). Fourth, both employ the standpoint of religion in articulating critique. As we have seen, for Baudrillard it is principally to be found in his preoccupation with the ritual forms of symbolic exchange, sacrifice, and seduction; for Žižek it is to be found in the exceptional nature of Christ and the event of Pauline Christianity. It is this exceptional nature of Christianity I now wish to turn to in evaluating Baudrillard's project in comparison to Žižek.

By way of a route in I want to turn first to Baudrillard's symbolic exchange. As suggested earlier, one way to frame symbolic exchange is gift-exchange. Much of the contemporary philosophical debate surrounding gift-exchange recognises Mauss's principle contribution although owes more to the arguments forwarded by Jacques Derrida and Jean Luc Marion than they do Baudrillard. In contrast to Mauss and Baudrillard they place the emphasis within the debate not with the reciprocity of the gift but the moment of excessive rupture that characterises the gift. For Derrida the 'pure' gift, like 'pure' forgiveness is given without a motive for return, the impossible if nonetheless necessary collate of the political field. Taken together excess and reciprocity define the problematic of gift-exchange, yet for Derrida the gift remains fundamentally the irruption of a closed economy (Horner 2001: 1). Or as Žižek himself puts it, paraphrasing Derrida, the gift is

> 'impossible', unaccountable act, the act that subverts the 'closed economy' of symbolic exchanges and is, as such, 'eternally past' – the pure gift not only precludes any counter-gesture, allows of no compensation, no return thanks; it even cannot and/or must not be acknowledged as a gift – the moment a gift is recognized as such, it gives rise to a symbolic debt in the recipient, it becomes entangled in the economy of exchange, and thus loses the characteristic of pure gift. The gift, therefore, is not; all we can say is that 'there is [*it y ales gibt*] one.' (Žižek 1994: 194)

The concept of 'gift' becomes then more generally for that generation of French thinkers, a key site for a political critique of the economy, the standpoint from which to assess and attack an economy subordinated to utility.

As Marika Rose has argued, while Žižek does not take the gift as a substantial category within his enterprise (his references to the gift occur mainly within a defence of Lacan's against Derrida's charge that the symbolic is a 'closed economy') when seen from the perspective of Lacan, Žižek's work is entirely about the problematic of the gift, symbolic exchange and the relation of excess to reciprocity (Rose 2014). Consider for example the following:

> The Lacanian notion of the symbolic order: this order of symbolic exchanges is based upon a constitutive surplus gesture that eludes the balance of exchanges - this is what 'symbolic castration' is ultimately about […] This excessive gesture that sets the circle of exchanges in motion while remaining external to it does not simply 'precede' the symbolic exchange: there is no way of grasping it as it is 'in itself', in its naked innocence; it can only be reconstructed retroactively as the inherent presupposition of the Symbolic. In other words, this gesture is 'real'. (Žižek 1994: 193)

For Žižek the symbolic necessarily entails "an existential debt that can never be honoured, since it [the real] sustains the very existence of a system of exchange-indemnification." (Žižek 1994: 194)

The difference for Žižek is that where the *aporia* of the gift leads Derrida to an ethical position which invites a resignation to the difficulty of the paradox as such (i.e. the irresolvable tension between giving in excess of the symbolic whilst working within it as such), thereby tempering the moment of excess within the existing symbolic, Žižek contends that the unpresentable ground of symbolization – "the violent opening up of a gap in the Real which is not yet symbolic (Žižek 1999: 239)" – provides the critical standpoint by which to call the symbolic as a whole into question.

In *The Puppet and the Dwarf* Žižek claims that Christianity provides the paradigmatic example of this radical act. Christ's sacrifice upon the cross was not of the order of symbolic exchange, i.e. a reciprocal sacrifice invoked to pay off a debt of sorts (that being the case who was God paying the debt too? Satan?). Rather, Christ's suffering like Baudrillard's gift is *also* "meaningless, not an act of meaningful exchange." (Žižek 2003: 125) The paradox is that Christ's death necessarily takes the form of a sacrifice but only to the extent it subverts the very meaning of sacrifice: What is sacrificed in Christ is the very need for a sacrificial economy, i.e. his death was meaningless in the sense that there is no Big Other or transcendental force manipulating the chains of causality or residing in a teleological appreciation to justify current misfortune. Christ's death confronts us with the *real* of the situation and therefore opens up the possibility for a reconfiguration of the symbolic as whole; i.e. a non-sacrificial logic.

All of this is summed up in Žižek's endorsement of Hegel's kenotic (self-emptying) reading of Christianity. According to Žižek, the kenotic logic of the cross

argues that "what dies on the cross not just his humanity or 'finite container'" (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 257) but God himself, the God of the beyond, i.e. the God of metaphysics. Thereafter, the Holy Spirit is simply constituted by the community of believers, the corporal body of the church. The realization of the cross is therefore the release it brings from transcendence making it homologous to Hegel's 'night of the world': Christ's cry of dereliction upon the cross is the point at which God confronts his own powerlessness: God is an atheist (Žižek 2003: 14). Thus what is 'revealed' in Christianity is not some positive content regarding God but, in a move which recalls Baudrillard's appreciation of the Jesuits, the very opposite: His non-Being.[3]

Here we encounter the principal difference between Baudrillard and Žižek. The difference pertains to the level of realism. For Baudrillard the secret revealed *al la* the Jesuits is simply that there is no God (hence his nihilism); for Žižek one must in a sense endorse God in a positivist manner to then claim the kenotic logic. As Žižek explains, "in the standard form of atheism God dies for men who stop believing in him; in Christianity, God dies *for himself*." (Žižek 2009: 48) Hence Žižek can claim, it is "not merely that I am a materialist through and through, and that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach; […] to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience." (Žižek, 2003: 6)

In the kenotic logic, Christ's dereliction and death affects a transposition in terms of a relating to others (e.g. in the manner someone might relate to a God or Big Other) to self-relating, i.e. transposing the gap *between* God and man into both God *and* man. And because one no longer relates to a Big Other the very possibility of a legal economy predicated on utility falls into question. For example, in this new mode of apprehension the very possibility of a theory of atonement predicated upon utility (an eye for an eye) becomes impossible simply because there is no Other for which to apply the principle of utility. And it is this theological reading which becomes the basis for a political act.

The ethical act for Žižek is an act undertaken in the order of what Lacan called the *real* i.e. an act without the support of the symbolic and hence not reducible to the logic of the given order, an act Žižek, following (whilst remaining critical) of

[3] Despite the protestations against Buddhism, arguably Žižek's description of God as non-Being brings him closer to that tradition than his writing allows?

what Walter Benjamin calls 'divine violence (Žižek 2008: 178); divine not in the sense of an interventionist act from a transcendent deity; 'divine' because the act itself is without justification form a Big Other. And because the act cannot be justified in terms of the existing conditions or the given order the very act necessarily induces a reconfiguration of the symbolic order. In this way the particular of the situation (i.e. the act) becomes raised to a universal truth (i.e. the Truth of a situation) to the extent it now *defines* the situation. (Žižek, 2008a: 409) Hence divine violence is not introduced to establish some imagined prior harmony but has in its sights the antagonism of the *real*, the impossibility which serves as the condition of possibility and around which social life is structured.

In Žižek's work this is formalised with reference to Alain Badiou's theory of the Event. Hence one way to describe the Event as articulated by Badiou and Žižek is as gift: An Event occurs when that which is excluded as the condition of a given system is rendered as a negative presence, manifest in the way it ruptures the appearance of normality, thereby opening a space in which to establish an alternate standpoint from which to establish social relations.

In *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*, Badiou, takes the birth of Christianity *qua* St Paul as his example, charting the formal procedure by which an event gives birth to a new truth situation. By 'truth' Badiou means a process which arises out of a break from what went before and persists through a progressive imposition which transforms the very way things *appear* in that situation (Hallward 2004: 2).

For Badiou truth begins with a wager, a formal decision upon something which is neither calculable nor demonstrable, and for which the results cannot be known in advance, but to which the subject declares his faith; in the act of faith the subject gives fixity to the event. Thereafter the process of truth becomes one of infinite verification, i.e. a constant examination within the situation of the consequences of the wager upon which the event was initially decided.

Reading back into Baudrillard, we can say that the gift amounts to an event to the extent it begins in the logic of an excessive moment on which one wagers a response and thereby establishes the bonds of reciprocity. Indeed, returning to Baudrillard's comments on the use of *witz* (part of his ironic strategy), one can note the way that a joke functions in regard of an event; i.e. a joke is a gift. In the first instance the use of *witz* "twists and distorts' the signifying chain, evading its logic to

create a void out of which laughter and enjoyment burst out." (Baudrillard 1993: 232) In this sense we can say Baudrillard is a theorist of the real like Žižek because both theorize the opening/void created by the excess or surplus within the signifying field as a possible type/kind of real. And because it is not enough to grasp a joke, but to to confirm the joke through its retelling, *witz* institutes a social relation (Baudrillard 1993: 232-233). In short, the strategic use of comedy in the work of Baudrillard amounts to a kind of diminutive event.

However, here we encounter what separates Baudrillard from Žižek: for Žižek the event *par excellence* is the event of Christianity. In other words, Christianity is not simply an exemplary form of the Event but *the* paradigm of the Event. Seen from this perspective, Baudrillard arguably remains captive to the broadly 'modern' paradigm of anthropology to the extent that Christianity is awarded no distinct or exceptional place. Christianity can be no more than an instance of a broader culture of sacrifice and the sacred. In this sense Baudrillard's postmodern nihilism produces a cultural relativism in which Žižek's 'paradigm of the event' is impossible because it provides a structuring of the signifying field in which things "cannot develop logically or dialectically any more, but only chaotically or randomly" (Baudrillard 2005: 8-9).

We can ask then, as Žižek does, what is the link between his Christianity, a politics of the Event, and atheism? His answer is worth quoting in full:

> Perhaps the link between Christianity and atheism becomes somewhat clearer if we take into account the surprising fact that the turn of Heidegger's *Being and Time*—that radical attempt to render thematic the unsurpassable finitude of the human condition—from the "reified" ontological approach to reality ("subject" perceiving "objects") toward the active engagement of being-in-the-world is grounded in his reading of Saint Paul in the early 1920s.An unexpected additional link between Heidegger and Badiou is discernible here: they both refer to Paul in the same ambiguous way. For Heidegger, Paul's turn from abstract philosophical contemplation to the committed existence of a believer indicates care and being-in-the-world, albeit only as an ontic model of what *Being and Time* deploys as the basic transcendental-ontological structure; in the same way, Badiou reads Paul as the first to deploy the formal structure of the Event and truth-procedure, although, for him, religion is not a proper domain of truth. In both cases, the Pauline experience thus plays the same ex-timate role: it is the best exemplification ("formal indication") of the ontological structure of the Event—albeit, in terms of its positive content, a "false" example, foreign to it. Ft6. (Zizek 2003: 174-174)

In other words, Christianity remains an exception to his theory and its value rests precisely in that. In this sense, despite his claim that the true dialectical

materialist must pass through the Christian experience, his position starts to look exactly like one of Baudrillard's ironic strategies, an example of Jarry's pataphysics – laws which govern exceptions which explain the universal – an exemplary form of what Lacan deemed the logic of masculinity.

Irony verses Humour

Arguably at this point we have reached our conclusion: the relation of Žižek to Baudrillard – with regard to the role of theology in their respective works – is that while the former embraces the exceptionalism of Christianity, the latter denies it. However, in a further twist one should invert the question. If our conclusion points to two opposing views in regard of how they situate theology (universal/exception), should one not ask in a dialectical twist: how does theology situate Baudrillard and Žižek? Given the influence of Kierkegaard on Baudrillard and much of Žižek's work (does not the logic of the Event conform to Kierkegaard's account of the teleological suspension of the ethical?) I propose that the difference between Baudrillard and Žižek can be most succinctly put in terms of the difference Kierkegaard attributes to the border zones which occupy his theory of the stages: the zone of irony and the zone of humour. As Kierkegaard explains: "There are three existence-spheres: the aesthetic, the ethical, the religious. To these there is a respectively corresponding *confinium* [border territory]: irony is the *confinium* between the aesthetic and the ethical; humour is the *confinium* between the ethical and religious" (Kierkegaard 1992: 501-50).

What differentiates the major spheres from their border zones is, as Stephen Evans argues, where the spheres represent universal personality types, easily identified in the general population such that they cut across the any specific form of intellect or class, the zones presuppose a particular intellect (Evans: 1983,185-205) which Kierkegaard observes in his distinction between an educated religious person and the simple religious person, observing "What the simple religious person does directly, the simple religiously aware person does only through humour" (Kierkegaard 1992: 179). The implication here is that the two zones were added by Kierkegaard to accommodate the more reflective person. Here, a reflective person is someone who maintains an intellectual understanding ahead of practice. All of this makes sense when one considers Kierkegaard's indirect style and his use of pseudonyms aimed to entice the reader who is not receptive to Christianity in an argument that

nonetheless leads to Christian conclusions. Hence a subject can be said to occupy a border zone at the point they reach an intellectual appreciation of the higher sphere yet without committing to it existentially. Said otherwise the border territories describe the point where the intellectual gives primacy to thought, paralysing the practical. In irony the subject has an intellectual understanding of the "ethical infinite requirement" (Kierkegaard 1992: 502) in relation to the finitude of the aesthetic; irony expresses the contradiction between knowing what to do in the ethical yet remaining in aesthetic categories. Humour expresses the contradiction between an intellectual understanding of Christianity whilst remaining in ethical categories. As Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus puts it:

> Humour, when it uses Christian categories (sin, forgiveness of sin, atonement, God in time, etc.), is not Christianity but a pagan speculative thought that has come *to know* all the essentially Christian. It can come deceptively close to the essentially Christian, but at the point where the decision captures [*fange*], at the point where existence captures the existing person, just as when the table captures [*Bordet fanger*] when a card is played, so that he must remain in existence, while the bridge of recollection and immanence behind is demolished […] – at that point humour is not present. (Kierkegaard 1992: 272)

In short, Baudrillard is an ironist who maintains an intellectual appreciation of what remains of the ethical (i.e. the symbolic) in the era of the simulacra, but in his drift towards nihilism paralyses his potential for critique. By contrast, in his adoption of Christianity Žižek remains a humourist whose appreciation of the radical potential of Christianity remains thwarted by his lack of practical commitment to the social body of the church which practices 'reciprocity' in gift-exchange *par excellence*. So while arguably Žižek's radical politics of the act at times amounts to a secularised version of Kierkegaard's 'teleological suspension of the ethical', Žižek's comic refusal of Christian commitment ensures he remains closer to the ethical than the religious.

If there is an issue however with Kierkegaard at this juncture it is surely that, despite the significance he awarded in his own work to the vernacular tongue he remained committed to the Latin Scholastic tradition to the extent he expunged the place of humour within Christianity: comedy is only ever a step (albeit like Hegel the final step) toward the Christian life; the Christian life knows nothing of comedy. And here Baudrillard and Žižek may prove insightful for the theological tradition. If Christianity is to remain critical within the conditions of postmodernity the mode of comedy itself may yet prove to be central to its contemporary articulation.

Conclusion

In an interview with Annie Laurent Baudrillard claims that "Everything I write is deemed brilliant, intelligent, but not serious" (Gane 1993: 189). If Žižek has garnered an interest which exceeds Baudrillard it is because he of all the cultural critics of the postmodern era has succeeded in taking seriously Baudrillard's challenge to seduce God, an ironic and comic strategy in pursuit of critique. Yet he can only do so by embracing religion in its exceptional form: Christianity – only now, not to arouse God back into life but fully into death – so perhaps what underlies the embrace or not of the exception in continental thought more generally is simply this difference: a materialist approach which remains committed to the real of the text, or a form of postmodernism which refutes the possibility of any dialectical method, structure, teleology, or otherwise.

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