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Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics

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Object-Oriented Baudrillard? Withdrawal and Symbolic Exchange

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Abstract: By comparing Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and Baudrillard through the lens of a study of the notion of withdrawal in Heidegger’s tool analysis and “The Question Concerning Technology”, this article explores the extent to which an Object-Oriented Baudrillard is possible, or even necessary. Considering an OOO understanding of Mauss’s gift-exchange, a possible critique of duoming in Baudrillard and a revision of Baudrillard’s understanding of art, the prospects of a new reading of Baudrillard and interpretation of OOO’s genealogy are established. These lines of comparison qualify the role of withdrawal in Baudrillard and symbolic exchange for OOO, and lead towards the conclusion that an Object-Oriented Baudrillard is possible, but may not, conversely, be considered necessary.

Keywords: Handiness; Heidegger; Mauss; Bataille; Simulacra; Signs; Technology; Objects; Art; Aesthetics

Is there a certain degree of congruence between Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and Baudrillard, and how might one communicate and exchange with the other? This enquiry seeks to answer this question by addressing the ways in which anticipatory traces of Baudrillard’s philosophy can be discovered in the work of Martin Heidegger, particularly in his tool analysis and *The Question Concerning Technology*, both being significant pieces for the development of Object-Oriented theory. Such an analysis will highlight the critical theme of “withdrawal” central to OOO’s thought and the value in the discussion of the technological in its broadest sense. Yet, conversely, it will not mean that the function of withdrawal will be assumed as identical in each. Rather, this shall be put under close scrutiny to advance a clearer understanding of all three. As much attention has previously been given to the relationship between OOO and Heidegger, the article will initially focus only on the relationship between Baudrillard and Heidegger, and how this account elucidates significant dimensions of Object-Oriented thought in a new way. In particular, this will pay close attention to the possibility of knowing an object and the role and character of gift-exchange in the primitive society, as well as whether the latter can be understood in a Heideggerian or Object-Oriented manner. I will then develop a closer analysis of the relationship between Baudrillard and OOO specifically, considering the relations between the fourfold object and symbolic exchange, duoming and other points, towards the possibility of a revised understanding of Baudrillard and a discussion of whether an Object-Oriented Baudrillard is possible, or even necessary.

1 Baudrillard and handiness

Assessing the possible comparison between Heidegger and the philosophy of Baudrillard, the tool-analysis employed by Heidegger’s *Being and Time* seems the most valuable place to start, having what Harman considers an “undeniably important place in Heidegger’s philosophy” and being arguably the

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most important insight of Heidegger for OOO.¹ It seems that such an analysis may unlock new perspectives upon both Heidegger and Baudrillard, but we should begin simply with a more descriptive outlook upon the two thinkers. We have at first two surface-level similarities between Heidegger's understanding of the practical utility of the tool as always belonging to "a totality of useful things," where "useful things always are *in terms of* their belonging to other useful things," and Baudrillard's theories of the system of objects and sign-exchange in his earlier philosophy.² In *The System of Objects* Baudrillard writes that the analysis of a "'spoken' system of objects," meaning the "more or less consistent system of meanings that objects institute," must be founded on a "plane distinct from this 'spoken' system, a more strictly structured plane transcending even the functional account of objects."³ For Baudrillard, this account is technological rather than strictly practical, and we will address this distinction more closely later, but for now it suffices to say that both thinkers consider the importance of the object existing in some kind of "system." It emerges later in Baudrillard's work that this system is essentially one which operates from a kind of unspoken general equivalency: that things are always "*in terms of*" other things, to use Heidegger's phrasing. Exemplifying this thinking, in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* Baudrillard takes up Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between signified and signifier in understanding the role of the sign in language, but argues that "[r]eferential value is annihilated, giving the structural play of value the upper hand [emphasis removed]," meaning that the connotations between things, rather than what a thing denotes on its own, becomes what is most significant and autonomous.⁴ In this sense, for Baudrillard there also exists a kind of pre-existing backgrounded system, like how for Heidegger the "totality of useful things is always already discovered *before* the individual useful thing," in a discovery which is not fully conscious but rather eminently practical.⁵ This kind of system of practical non-knowledge is in Heideggerian terms not "a knowledge of the useful character of the hammer" but rather a kind of "*handiness [Zuhandenheit]*" by which a thing "reveals itself by itself."⁶ For Baudrillard we are also not generally in a position to *know* this backgrounded system and it also characterizes the majority of our everyday experience, or at least seems to. Yet, contrasted with Heidegger, it is critical for Baudrillard that this backgrounded system is not a kind of more primary relationship, or a revealing, but rather a kind of code which conceals the fact that reality has been replaced by a kind of hyperreality admitting no withdrawn origin, existing only on the surface. Thus, we should not be so quick to identify the system of tools in Heidegger with sign-exchange, or the role of the "code" for Baudrillard – the backgrounded system which guarantees the circulation of "signs that exchange among themselves" – but this should not deter us from exploring a deeper comparison between the thinkers and opens up an alternative approach which enriches both.⁷

The first step towards this other approach is found in considering the concept of *withdrawal*, which also plays a crucial part in OOO. Heidegger first hints at this idea by talking about how the tool, or system of tools, cannot be discovered through abstraction: for Heidegger, "[n]o matter how keenly we just *look* at the 'outward appearance' of things constituted in one way or another, we cannot discover handiness."⁸ Yet Heidegger also extends this by arguing that "[w]hat is peculiar to what is initially at hand is that it withdraws, so to speak, in its character of handiness in order to be really handy."⁹ Whereas the OOO theorist might go even further, with Graham Harman proposing that "theory and praxis both live on the same side of the fence" in failing to grasp the reality of things, I believe a new comparison between Heidegger's theory of handiness and Baudrillard's theory of symbolic exchange should be opened up prior to considering its degree of similarity with OOO.¹⁰ Symbolic exchange is the mode of exchange found in primitive society,

1 Harman, *Speculative Realism*, 93.

2 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 68.

3 Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 2-3.

4 Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 28.

5 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 68.

6 *Ibid.*, 69.

7 Baudrillard, *Political Economy of the Sign*, 147.

8 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 69.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Harman, *Speculative Realism*, 93.

where things are not exchanged in terms of some general equivalent (as in sign-exchange), but rather in terms of a kind of *functional act*, which exhausts the ritual object and returns the excess to “nature.” We can see this exemplified in how Baudrillard views the “symbolic function” of primitive societies as “articulated not through the law of the Father [...] but from the outset through a collective principle, through the collective movement of exchanges.”¹¹ There is no pre-existing equivalent or schema under which things can continually exchange and shift without some element that withdraws, and any specific primitive exchange cannot be merely equivalent (identical) to another. This specificity mirrors Heidegger’s claim that in the practical role of his tool analysis, “the work to be produced is not just useful for...; production itself is always a using of something for something,” in other words, a specific function within which its sensual effects are exhausted with no remainder.¹² An important exemplar of this can be found in the forms of symbolic gift-exchange discussed by Marcel Mauss, and the specific outline of the value of this comparison for Heidegger and OOO will be addressed later. Lastly though, it is worth reinstating the prior analysis with the claim that this crucial comparison exists in terms of the analysis of withdrawal and the possibility of reading symbolic exchange as a kind of withdrawal, one where a thing is not exhausted by its sensual effects, but rather is withdrawn or “returns.” This builds on and challenges the initial possible comparison between the system of objects, sign-exchange and Heidegger’s handiness with a more sophisticated comparison with symbolic exchange. A closer analysis of this will be the primary focus of the next few sections and will allow us to develop the speculative outlines of a possible Object-Oriented Baudrillard.

2 Baudrillard and withdrawal

One element that is critical to Heidegger’s tool-analysis is the idea that to discover a *presence*, i.e. to incorporate it into our knowledge, is in some sense to lose the thing. For Heidegger, when we find nature “in its mere objective presence [*Vorhandenheit*]” we miss the dimension that “stirs and strives,” that which “overcomes us, entrances us as landscape, remains hidden.”¹³ An analysis like this draws obvious parallels with Baudrillard’s criticisms of the flattening of discourse into a kind of abstract “rationality” which assumes everything to be fundamentally knowable in some way. It’s along these lines that Baudrillard critiques a project which he sees as the attempt to “liquidate the given world. To destroy it by substituting an artificial one, built from scratch, a world for which we do not have to account to anyone.”¹⁴ It seems that such a criticism is directed at attempts to account for a world fully constructed and subsumed by ourselves and our scientific categories, ones which we have formed and which, at least without nuance, seek to reduce everything to some fundamental layer totally distinct from the “given” world of unabstracted practice that Heidegger talks of. This act of “[m]easuring the world by the Human” is exactly the kind of anthropocentric hubris that OOO aims to critique and is thus a first line of connection between Baudrillard and these anti-anthropocentric philosophers, mirroring that of Heidegger’s own claim that “the river’s ‘source’ ascertained by the geographer is not the ‘source in the ground’.”¹⁵ However, we should not leave Heidegger behind just yet. One other key line of comparison between Baudrillard and Heidegger can be found in their respective understandings of the *essence* of technology, something for which both writers are to some degree infamous. Heidegger’s important work, *The Question Concerning Technology* can be shown to be of significant value for interpreting Baudrillard and will also, when interpreted through Baudrillard’s philosophy, shed some new light on the relationship between OOO and Heidegger.

¹¹ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 156.

¹² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 70.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, 17.

¹⁵ Ibid., 20; Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 70.

3 The question concerning technology

Heidegger diagnoses that the essence of technology is distinct from its understood functioning, suggesting that “in order to be correct, this fixing by no means needs to uncover the thing in question in its essence.”¹⁶ Rather, beyond its mere definition as both “means to an end” and “human activity,” technology is something which goes beyond and hints at something that withdraws.¹⁷ The essence of technology is thus a “bringing-forth” which “brings hither out of concealment forth into unconcealment,” in a process which is “grounded in revealing.”¹⁸ Such a process should lead to the unconcealment of certain *truths* about an object, perhaps, as OOO might diagnose it, in terms of its withdrawal from direct epistemological access, or from its sensual qualities. However, Heidegger suggests that with the modern form of technology, although it is still a form of revealing, its essence of revealing shifts radically towards a new mode. He writes that this “revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [*Herausfordern*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such,” and this claim towards the essential role of the “standing-reserve [*Bestand*]” for Heidegger’s diagnosis of modern technology can be usefully reinterpreted through the philosophy of Jean Baudrillard, and one of his predecessors, Georges Bataille.¹⁹ In a significant section which clearly highlights how Heidegger interprets this difference, he sees how the peasant, who may use certain technologies, although they may be somewhat primitive, “does not challenge the soil of the field. In the sowing of the grain it places the seed in the keeping of the forces of growth and watches over its increase,” something which he believes that the essence of modern technology encourages us to neglect.²⁰ It seems most useful to understand this traditional form of technology as grounded in an act of not only bringing-forth (revealing), of the possibility of change and new growth, but also as an act of withdrawal: a return to the “keeping of the forces of growth.” The soil of the field is thus revealed by sowing the seed, but in another sense withdraws. In doing so, one certainly does not “challenge” it by hoping to make the soil fully on the surface such that it can be “stored” by us without any return or reinvestment in that which exceeds our powers, and a parallel conceptions of this kind of objection to the contemporary age are addressed by Georges Bataille in *The Accursed Share Vol.1*.

For Bataille, whose work on the concept of the accursed share is a significant influence for Baudrillard, if there is some part of our consumed standing-reserve (accursed share) that “is doomed to destruction or at least to unproductive use without any possible profit, it is logical, even *inescapable*, to surrender commodities without return.”²¹ To avoid confusion, I suggest that we should certainly not take “profit” in its reductive sense of the restricted economy, but in Bataille’s understanding of economy as *general economy*, a kind of productive organic growth, or development of new potentiality. Equally, “without return” should, it seems, be understood in the sense that what is not *used* cannot be returned to an immediately accessible standing-reserve, but must instead be entirely withdrawn (by exhausting its sensual dimension) in a similar way to how the watch of the seed is withdrawn to a real “nature,” existing behind and separate from an object’s standing-reserve. The object is thus never fully at our disposal and, although there is perhaps a moral dimension implied here, there is also a degree of philosophical wisdom in assenting to the idea that something always withdraws from our understanding and practice. This piece of wisdom plays a critical role for both OOO and, as I will elaborate, for Baudrillard as well. Returning then to the earlier remark on Mauss, our next step should be to develop an account of symbolic gift-exchange as a theory of withdrawal and find our entry point into an account of a possible Object-Oriented Baudrillard.

¹⁶ Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11, 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14, 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

²¹ Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volume 1*, 25.

4 Withdrawal and symbolic exchange

It seems, then, that we might be able to interpret Baudrillard's notion of sign-exchange in a new light through this concept of the standing-reserve and via a comparison with Heidegger's analysis of the essence of technology. One last critical dimension of this theory is his concept of Enframing, which marks how "unconcealment comes to pass in conformity with which the work of modern technology reveals the real as standing-reserve," hence something both there to be known, but also alienated from us and ungrounded.²² Just as how sign-exchange marks the disappearance of the object of reference into the play of signifiers, Heidegger's standing-reserve marks the condition where "even the object disappears into the objectlessness."²³ Yet it is also within this same work that we see the emerging line of comparison between the withdrawal of the object in the truth-process, the "revealing" of traditional technology, and the notion of symbolic exchange for Baudrillard. The best exemplar of the logic of symbolic exchange, as hinted earlier, is likely to be found in Mauss's great sociological study of gift-exchange from *The Gift*. For Mauss,

this principle of the gift-exchange must have been that of societies that have gone beyond the phase of 'total services' (from clan to clan, and from family to family) but have not yet reached that of purely individual contract, of the market where money circulates, of sale proper, and above all of the notion of price reckoned in coinage weighed and stamped with its value.²⁴

Here it becomes apparent that exchange takes place not in the form of "total services," where everything is conducted merely as one single mass exchange, but also not in an exchange against a general equivalent, where "money circulates" and everything is exchanged within and against a presumed standing-reserve. We are thus between perhaps the most hierarchical and the most modern forms of exchange with a form which neither ignores the role of the specific *individual* object (gift) by reducing it to a standing-reserve of other gifts (its relation in a flattened network of actants), nor to a singular point of focus, such as the total exchange of various pieces between clan leaders only. The gift object itself therefore cannot be reduced or exhausted merely in its original function, which is just to be given, since it also carries with it a kind of obligation for it to be returned (although this is never made explicit as an object for epistemological awareness). In the specific object employed for its specific function, and symbolizing a certain gesture (with a set of sensual effects) there is always something which withdraws, and must be returned without being exhausted – without making all of it available as standing-reserve.

This gift-exchange should not be taken to exhaust the possibilities of symbolic exchange, which indeed may have an even more general form in turn as well, but is perhaps the best way of exemplifying it in a practical context. It is, in a sense, a specific *technology* of symbolic exchange, where the central premise is merely that there is always a reciprocal (dual) relation between the gift given and the gift received: one which is never symmetrical. Harman's OOO makes a similar point, emphasizing the view that with the tension between an object and its qualities (and also between the sensual and the real) one should not presume that these relations are always symmetrical. In metaphor, for example, it is not the case that the object is identical to its qualities, and thus also not true that a symmetrical literalism is valid. To use Harman's example, the "metaphorical object is a cypress with flame-qualities," but it would be false to assume that this entails a symmetrical object of a "flame with cypress-qualities."²⁵ This kind of equivalency is criticized by Baudrillard as well, since it would become the presencing of everything in terms of a general equivalent, such as money, sign-exchange etc., when for Baudrillard, and arguably for Mauss, the symbolic relation cannot be exchanged for anything else, and is thus uni-directional and asymmetrical. This aspect of symbolic exchange plays a critical role in constituting the possibility of a meaningful practice beyond *the code* for Baudrillard, but perhaps more interestingly for our purposes, it offers a new line of comparison between Baudrillard and OOO.

²² Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁴ Mauss, *The Gift*, 59 [all emphases removed].

²⁵ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 75.

Before outlining a more precise speculative theory of an Object-Oriented gift-exchange, inspired by the prior analysis, it is worth briefly summarizing some of the important tenants of OOO which are relevant to such an enquiry. For the purposes of simplicity, I have favored Graham Harman's interpretation of the theory, which can be appropriately captured in the idea, briefly raised earlier, that there are a number of tensions both between an object and its qualities and between what is called sensual and what is called real. These tensions give us a fourfold structure, composed of real objects, sensual objects, real qualities and sensual qualities. The real object is that which can be compared to this "withdrawn" object we have talked about above, which is for Harman (borrowing from José Ortega y Gasset) a reference to "the *executant* reality of things in their own right."²⁶ Sensual objects, conversely, are ones for which there is no inwardness, since they "are nothing more than correlates of our experience."²⁷ These are comparable to the role of the object (signified) in sign-exchange for Baudrillard, although this is perhaps only the case when we mistake the sensual object for the real (withdrawn) one, which is the condition when we take the sensual object as a real object existing for us *exhaustively* in the standing-reserve of the code. Any object must have certain qualities, and the sensual qualities are the qualities a sensual object appears to have at any given moment, although these may shift around as the object is extended through time. Real qualities, conversely, are qualities which an object must necessarily have. Between this fourfold there are, as stated before, a number of different tensions (ten to be exact, four between objects and qualities, three between qualities and three between objects) but we should only see which tensions are most relevant for our enquiry here. I would like to suggest that the most important tension for Baudrillard is the tension between real object and sensual object since this, I maintain, is what can be held to characterize Baudrillard and Mauss's understanding of the gift, and hence symbolic exchange more broadly.

To demonstrate this proposal, we should begin by recognizing that the gift given is a real object, but it is also one which is never exhausted in the act of giving (it always withdraws), and it is this which gives it its power of obligation. The gift received is thus a sensual object in one respect (it is this sensual object with these various real and sensual qualities), and in this sense Harman is right that "[t]he real object that I myself am is directly confronted by sensual objects," but also, in another respect, I must be aware that this excessive gift cannot be held in standing-reserve forever.²⁸ The sensual object must be spent, exhausted and returned according to Bataille's principle of expenditure. I am thus aware that the sensual object does not exhaust the real one that withdraws, and that to preserve its magic I must preserve its *illusion*, that is, I must preserve the fact that the sensual object is a façade and not assume that I have a direct access or knowledge of it. In doing so, I return the object, rather than leave it in standing-reserve, by expending its sensual façade and accepting its withdrawal from me. The first gift-giver is now given, by the first gift-receiver, a new sensual object (gift) in their *return* of the real object which withdraws. This exchange can continue *ad infinitum*, theoretically, since the gift-receiver must never hold onto the sensual object entirely as standing-reserve (which is not to take it as a sensual object, but to take it mistakenly as a real one), meaning that the withdrawn real object can continually give sensual facades or illusion, as Baudrillard terms it, without ever being claimed to be exhausted.²⁹ It is when we mistake the sensual object for the real one, where it becomes merely standing-reserve for us, that we abandon illusion and fall into the precession of simulacra, and to the hyperreality of the present condition. This trap is the presumption that we, as real objects, can directly interact with and have knowledge of the other real objects – to make the assumption that there is no distinction between real and sensual object. The best way of understanding how one may avoid such a danger is to consider Baudrillard's relation to OOO's critique of overmining, undermining and duoming.

²⁶ Ibid., 78.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 162.

²⁹ Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 65.

5 Baudrillard and duominging

For any Object-Oriented Ontologist the major threat is the obliteration or reduction of an object to something else, essentially to something that is knowable. For Harman there are two different techniques for explaining what something is, the first being a tactic to undermine it, “replacing a thing with its causal, material, or compositional elements,” and the second a tactic of overmining, by reducing “things to their impact on us or on each other.”³⁰ In either case one seems to miss the object itself, something which we’ve already seen to be significant. Instead, again, everything is reduced to that which is knowable and the objects of knowledge are always accessible in standing-reserve. This is particularly potent in the tendency of duominging, which is effectively the combination of both strategies simultaneously, giving two distinct forms of image whilst eliminating the object which withdraws from them. For Baudrillard, it seems particularly obvious that undermining is a concern although, as will be made clear, this becomes intimately interconnected in its functioning alongside overmining as well.

Both Baudrillard and Heidegger have a deep skepticism towards science, or, if we are to be a bit more charitable, at least towards scientism. For Baudrillard that which is “other, the object, disappears on the horizons of science,” which bears a clear resemblance to the idea that science at its most extreme often tends towards reductivist notions of a complete theory of everything, which posits any object as hypothetically knowable in a way which is normally characterized by undermining things to their basic parts, establishing some kind of explicit material basis to which the properties of more complex forms can be reduced.³¹ This argument against excessive scientism was already present in Heidegger’s critique of how contemporary “science’s way of representing pursues and entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces,” missing the critical role of the withdrawn and backgrounded “nature,” having an importance for Heidegger which has already been well established in the earlier section on technology.³² This insight is certainly shared by Harman as well, who sees aesthetics as the root of all philosophy, and not science or scientific methodology, which to some degree presupposes a direct access to the workings of things themselves (at least as currently practiced).³³

Conversely, however, we should not assume that Baudrillard is a theorist of overmining either, since although the surface effects of things play such a crucial and fascinating role for his critique of the contemporary, there is, at least in his earlier works, a clear sense of the importance of withdrawal, as demonstrated earlier in the comparative sections with Heidegger. Thus, we need to be a little critical of Harman’s argument that “Baudrillard belongs in roughly the same camp as Husserl. With his career-long emphasis on simulation and simulacra, Baudrillard is the very opposite of a traditional realist, and he closes off the realm of withdrawn substance at least as much as Husserl does,” for two mistakes, or at least points of omission which are not adequately raised.³⁴ Firstly, his interest in simulation and simulacra is not quite career-long and it omits some of his earliest work on the system of objects, the structural critique of Marx, symbolic exchange and so on, and secondly, as raised throughout this essay, by missing this dimension we do not begin to see the importance of precisely why Baudrillard “closes off the realm of withdrawn substance.”³⁵ Even in some of his more pessimistic work, which did preoccupy a considerable amount of his career, such as the more nihilistic *Fatal Strategies* (1990), we see the significance of the object contra the commodity. Whereas the commodity is “readable,” the object “never confesses completely its secret.”³⁶ Thus, it seems that his notion of the revenge of the object, “the fatal reversibility of the object” which “lies in wait for us,” is something which is best understood not only alongside his later works, but also in conjunction with his earlier works and particularly with the concept of symbolic exchange, something which, as suggested in our readings of Heidegger and the gift, brings Baudrillard much closer to Heidegger

³⁰ Harman, *Speculative Realism*, 92; Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 49.

³¹ Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 85.

³² Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 21.

³³ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 61-102.

³⁴ Harman, “Object-Oriented Seduction,” 130.

³⁵ See Baudrillard, *The System of Objects, For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* and other texts.

³⁶ Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 67.

than Harman suspected.³⁷ In this sense Baudrillard, although he recognizes the contemporary prevalence of overmining, and to some degree immerses himself in its dizzying majesty, should not be assumed to be completely neglectful of the “withdrawn substance,” even if he does suggest that our recognition of it becomes irrecoverable within this contemporary moment.

Interestingly, then, Baudrillard is probably best understood as an early critic of the tendency of duoming, despite often indulging in this himself, through his recognition of how reducing things to the dizzying surface, whilst at the same time pursuing a scientism which reduces things to their basic parts, sees the object (and the subject with it as well) become completely lost. In the tendency to over-extend our subjective capabilities and power, using modern technology to “challenge” everything into the standing-reserve of possible knowledge, we set the conditions instead for the very opposite tendency, where “all initiative and power are on the other side, the side of the object.”³⁸ This paradox is best explained by the notion that in this project to make everything available in standing-reserve, we begin to reduce ourselves merely to the level of something to be known, and commit the error of alienating ourselves towards the same two duomed images to which we reduce everything else. It is therefore, conversely to what might be expected, that the hidden withdrawnness of objects has its last revenge, as the “subject of analysis has become fragile everywhere and this revenge of the object has only just begun.”³⁹ This is best illustrated by the example of the increasing threat of climate change and other ecological catastrophes which emerge on the horizon even when we are at our most dominant conceptually: where the very emergent conditions of the Anthropocene also mark a degree of human helplessness against the objects it tried to exhaustively understand and control. In this light, we now have the possibility of reading Baudrillard as increasingly a thinker of an object-oriented tendency. Yet, contra Harman, Baudrillard was often keen to denigrate the role of art and aesthetics, and this may serve as an argument against seeing him as object-oriented thinker, given the crucial role art has for OOO. I propose that Baudrillard was to some degree mistaken, or at least too critical, in his understanding of art’s functional purpose, and before addressing the question of whether he is fully compatible with OOO, it would first be useful to highlight why Harman and Ortega’s theory of aesthetics offers a useful counter-argument against Baudrillard, and how this point may allow us to revise his account.

6 Aesthetics and withdrawal

Probably the clearest and most concise elucidation of Baudrillard’s views on art are contained in his book *The Intelligence of Evil*, which was one of his last books and well after the pessimistic turn of his thought. For Baudrillard, what he calls the “conspiracy” of art can be found in the “complicity that art forges with itself, its collusion with the real, through which it becomes complicit in that Integral Reality.”⁴⁰ To dissect this we should define more clearly the notion of “Integral Reality” and then consider what Baudrillard’s sense of “the real” is here, and how the real for Baudrillard differs from the withdrawn “reality” of OOO. Integral Reality, in Baudrillard’s words, marks the contemporary condition where “everything becomes real, everything becomes visible and transparent, everything is ‘liberated’, everything comes to fruition and has a meaning.”⁴¹ It is essentially the condition where, after the death of God, “we have found ourselves confronted with the undertaking of *realizing* the world,” and this is perhaps clearest in the Enlightenment-style project of establishing an all-encompassing knowledge which can be characterized by the duoming tactic we have just been critiquing.⁴² Unlike Harman, Baudrillard holds that art is essentially complicit with this contemporary duoming, and the Heideggerian notion of holding everything in standing-reserve. Yet Harman takes a radically different view, understanding art and aesthetics, particularly the metaphor which,

³⁷ Ibid., 72.

³⁸ Ibid., 119.

³⁹ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁰ Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil*, 83.

⁴¹ Ibid., 13.

⁴² Ibid.

following Ortega, he takes to be the paradigm case of the logic of the aesthetic, as the root of all philosophy and the method to reintroduce the critical importance of things-in-themselves in a non-ethical sense.⁴³ It is thus worth addressing in further detail why these two views are so distinct in order to understand whether they are reconcilable or if one or both accounts require revision.

Contra Harman, Baudrillard sees art as essentially representational and concerned with the attempt to represent something. The problem with this for Baudrillard, and why it becomes “complicit,” is that in our dizzying and intimately interconnected world, it has become the case that “art invaded the whole field of reality” and thus that it has nothing to represent but itself: “Art is quite simply what is at issue in the world of art.”⁴⁴ Baudrillard never explicitly employs the same ontology as OOO and it thereby seems that Baudrillard understands the aesthetic not in terms of a conscious hinting at what withdraws, or as an active theatricality, but rather as something which is merely complicit with “the real” which for Baudrillard is always already the hyperreal – the seamless and smooth exchange of sensual qualities which marks the postmodern condition. On the other hand, what Harman offers us is an understanding of art that is not inherently or necessarily representative, since it strictly cannot represent something which withdraws, other than in the sense that it stands in for it, but also hints at a beyond. It is this beyond which is gestured at that Baudrillard doesn’t recognize in art, yet for Harman art is almost always a productive endeavor: the creation of a new compound object, where the beholder as real object “creates its own object in the very act of believing [emphasis removed]” in the metaphor, i.e. believing that the metaphor can stand in for the real object in some sense, but without exhausting it.⁴⁵ For Harman then, contra Baudrillard, art can still generate difference and the new, since the compound object is a new object, one which is not merely an orgy of difference given that it hints at and points towards the closure of something beyond itself – the object that withdraws. If OOO are right, we can take Baudrillard’s criticism of representational and self-representational art without accepting that the whole aesthetic project is already dead. Baudrillard is thus also still partially right to argue that art “in its form, signifies nothing. It is merely a sign pointing towards absence,” since it quite literally points towards something which is absent in the sensual, namely an object which withdraws.⁴⁶ Yet, also, Baudrillard is to some degree wrong, since he assumes that art has nothing beyond its value in sign-exchange, the market and commodity value of “art,” something which Harman’s understanding of the aesthetic metaphor and real object/ sensual quality tension makes clear. If Baudrillard were to accept that such a characterization of art was possible, it would open up a whole new line of comparison between him and OOO. I hope to have demonstrated at least a few reasons why such a characterization might not be strictly contradictory. For now, though, we should consider, assuming that such a comparison holds, whether we can go so far as to posit an Object-Oriented Baudrillard and address in detail what such a proposal would entail.

7 Towards an Object-Oriented Baudrillard?

One key distinguishing factor between Baudrillard and OOO is that whilst for Bataille, Baudrillard and seemingly for Heidegger as well, at least as hinted at in parts of the tool-analysis and *The Question Concerning Technology* discussed before, what can be said to withdraw is some kind of unspecified (or unspecifiable) “nature”, this is not necessarily one that proclaims the individual and independent nature of every object in doing so. This claim is central for OOO in Harman’s proposition that a tool can *break*, but that it “could not break if it were nothing more than its functional relations to all other beings” and hence that there must be some “stubborn surface” beneath every object.⁴⁷ It seems, conversely, that thinkers like Bataille and Baudrillard hold that what withdraws is another possible organization or exchange beyond every existing one: beyond every Enframing there is some nature, force, materiality which withdraws and

⁴³ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 69.

⁴⁴ Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil*, 84.

⁴⁵ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 181.

⁴⁶ Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil*, 86.

⁴⁷ Harman, *Speculative Realism*, 94.

is not exhausted in what it “gives” (gifts). This recognition keeps the notion of finitude but to some degree leaves open the possibility that objects are not actually totally independent, but only independent with regard to any framing of them. That a tool can break in the frame would simply then be to reveal that the frame, indeed any framing process, is inadequate: being is always a *call* beyond any particular frame, a hinting at something that withdraws. For Baudrillard this is best captured by his proposal that since humans “have put an end to this dual relation with the sun,” we can no longer understand or even conceive of the idea that something withdraws from the frame, since there is no “dual, antagonistic exchange” when everything is held in standing-reserve.⁴⁸ We thus lose the call of being and in turn face our becoming-object in the sense of which the object is merely the sensual standing-reserve which is in itself nothing. There is then at least some suggestion of a realist ontology in Baudrillard, but the question remains as to whether or not one is impelled to accept OOO’s specific variation even if we assented to the various premises of Heidegger or Baudrillard. The debate on OOO’s interpretation of Heidegger is already well established, but given that Baudrillard is a distinct thinker in his own right, we should consider whether this opens up new lines of approach.

Returning to aspects of Baudrillard’s philosophy then, we see at least one indication that his philosophy might be open to an OOO interpretation in the gift-exchange discussed previously. For this and any other form of symbolic exchange, it is always *this* specific gift that is exchanged and not another, reflecting Baudrillard’s central proposition that symbolic exchange is irreducible to sign-exchange and its principle of equivalency. It seems, then, that Baudrillard accepts the specificity of the symbolically exchanged sensual object and its non-identity to its merely sensual qualities (at least in the primitive society) since it is not the sensual qualities, which are for Baudrillard merely the inessential connotations or play of signifiers which make the specific object itself (its denotation) arbitrary, which exhaust this object. Having rejected the Humean bundle theory view, Baudrillard was, in his view of primitive exchange, committed to a sensual object and sensual quality split. He was also, as we have demonstrated, committed to a real object, taken at this point merely as something that withdraws in order to retain the “illusion” and not hold everything in standing-reverse. Yet, as we know, there can be no object without qualities, so the real object must also, presumably, have qualities – there are thus at least some real qualities essential to the real object, and we can assume at least some of these are present in the sensual object. Given the range of sensual qualities attached to various sensual objects, we can also then presume that these objects do not share the same real qualities. Some of these real qualities will contradict, and thus we have good reason to presume that there may not be a single real withdrawn object, materiality, force etc. that can account for them. Such a view would give good credence to the account that Baudrillard’s symbolic exchange would encourage an acceptance of an Object-Oriented metaphysics. However, this does not constitute a strict proof. One major reservation is that we have already granted that what is withdrawn is an “object,” thereby to some degree projecting our understanding of objecthood onto it, giving us the presupposition that this is something which has irreconcilable real qualities and must therefore be a variety of real and totally independent objects. It seems conceivable, conversely, that some other kind of ontology might be able to explain the same sensually conceived phenomena, such as Iain Hamilton Grant’s view of a withdrawn “productive force that generates individual bodies as a derivative byproduct.”⁴⁹ We, emerging within the process, would have no conscious access to the force in its totalized sense, but only the view of its production of bodies at a certain scale, and the same would be true in a parallel sense with other bodies. Hypothetically, one could also explain the “challenge” technology puts to nature by reducing this force to its acts on a certain scale, or to specific bodies which are produced, thus alienating us from a real process which seems to withdraw. Whether or not such a comparison holds beyond this very preliminary suggestion is far beyond our scope here, but nevertheless the criticism seems to hold.

What we have then, is at least one frame of understanding by which we could grasp and reinterpret Baudrillard as an object-oriented thinker, as well as a number of useful lines of comparison between Harman and Baudrillard’s thought. It seems that Baudrillard’s symbolic exchange constitutes an interesting and

⁴⁸ Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil*, 148.

⁴⁹ Harman, *Speculative Realism*, 63.

new way to conceive of some of the tensions in OOO, and to reconceive of the relationship with Heidegger through a non-standard emphasis on certain parts of *The Question Concerning Technology*. Alongside this, we have a clearer picture of the role of aesthetics for OOO and Baudrillard, as well as a new way of approaching and conceiving the problem of duoming through Baudrillard's philosophy. That we cannot show Baudrillard as necessarily an OOO thinker is thus not so much a loss, but instead opens up new lines of potential thought which might otherwise have remained closed.

8 Conclusion

By considering a broader range of texts, we have been able to demonstrate the irreducibility of Baudrillard to a kind of Husserl-style reading attempted at least to some degree by Harman and in doing so discovered that there are new lines of comparison to be found between Baudrillard, Heidegger and Harman in ways which enrich all three. We have seen that symbolic gift-exchange can be modelled in a way which is compatible with OOO and offers an interesting way of conceiving the withdrawn object. Alongside this, we have seen the critical importance of avoiding the tendency to duomine objects entirely, by presuming that everything could hypothetically come under the purview of our knowledge, or be accessible by our practice. In demonstrating the possibility of an object-oriented Baudrillard we have also shown, however, that this is not the only plausible ontology for such a position, and it would be valuable to explore in greater depth whether or not his symbolic exchange is compatible with other metaphysical systems. It would also be useful to have a more exact picture of where Baudrillard and Heidegger disagree, given that our focus here has been primarily on possible lines of convergence between the two. To conclude then, we may ask, in the ironic spirit of Baudrillard himself: there are many *sensual* Baudrillards, but who or what is the *real* Baudrillard that withdraws?

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