

CRIMES OF THE NEAR FUTURE: BAUDRILLARD / BALLARD

Benjamin Noys¹

In his key work *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981) Jean Baudrillard lauded the British science-fiction writer J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash* (1973) as 'the first great novel of the universe of simulation' (1994: 119). The novel explored a world of perverse obsession with the erotic potential of the car-crash saturated by media imagery. For Baudrillard it took science-fiction beyond its usual coordinates of imaginary future universes and towards our world as hyperreal (1994: 125). In this situation of the 'precession of simulacra' (1991: 1, Baudrillard's italics) theory becomes science-fiction and science-fiction becomes theory. Therefore we see a point of convergence between the writing of Jean Baudrillard and J. G. Ballard, which has developed as both try to ascertain the precise mutations of this new universe of simulation. Together they form a strange kind of Beckettian 'pseudo-couple': locked together as 'Baudrillard-Ballard' or 'Ballard-Baudrillard'. Despite the fact that, unlike the most famous theoretical 'pseudo-couple' of Deleuze and Guattari, they have not collaborated together numerous points of exchange exist between them. This is not a neutral cooperation but often takes an antagonistic form; what Baudrillard calls the mode of alterity or 'the duel' (2005: 72). However, in this mode we find an increasingly shared diagnosis of the present and a 'hypercriticism' that tracks the fate of alterity (synonymous for Baudrillard with Otherness, difference, and negativity in their radical forms). If the universe of simulation aims at 'a virtual universe from which everything dangerous and negative has been expelled' (2005: 202) then alterity will be its victim.

This problem can be seen in what might seem an appropriately

¹Benjamin Noys is Lecturer in English in the School of Cultural Studies at The University of Chichester. He is the author of *Georges Bataille* (2000) and *The Culture of Death* (2005).

mediated reference to Baudrillard in Ballard's recent novel *Super-Cannes* (2000): 'I sat down and ordered a vin blanc from the young French waitress, who wore jeans and a white vest printed with a quotation from Baudrillard' (88). Although this might be dismissed as a typically postmodern ironic 'in-joke' it actually speaks to the fate of alterity. The extremity of Baudrillard's own theory becomes absorbed as a marketing tool by the culture industry, reduced to an unnamed quotation. What we can see here is a further mutation of the 'perfect crime' of the murder of alterity. This is a crime which also 'erases its own tracks' (Baudrillard, 2005: 197) by the production of new forms of simulated alterity. This then is the situation faced by the hypercritic; not only the extermination of any principle of alterity from which to make a critique but also the simulation of critique itself. It is precisely this mutation that both Baudrillard and Ballard engage with in their recent work.

Baudrillard's example is that of auto-immune disorders (1993: 60-70). The more medicine eliminates disease the more it becomes haunted by disorders in which the body's own immune system turns on itself. To avoid the disastrous consequences of this elimination of alterity the system of simulation introduces doses of homeopathic alterity (small amounts of alterity that keep the system in 'health' rather than leading it to turn on itself). In this way simulation goes so far as to simulate alterity, after it has 'murdered' its truly threatening forms. The result is a new form of what Baudrillard calls 'trompe-l'oeil negativity' (2005: 203), the simulated mirror-image of 'real' alterity. Although Baudrillard has laid a great deal of stress on this analysis recently, such as in Part II of *The Transparency of Evil* (1993: 113-174), it was present in his earlier work. In *Simulacra and Simulation* he remarks about the capacity of simulation 'to regenerate a moribund principle through simulated scandal, phantasm, and murder - a sort of hormonal treatment through negativity and crisis' (1994: 18-19). In fact it also bears close resemblance to the 'artificial negativity' thesis of Paul Piccone (1978) and the Telos group who, inspired by the work of the Frankfurt school, argued that the system required protest to buoy its functioning. Piccone argued the new left and other social movements of the 1960s were not real threats to the social system, but encouraged by the system to correct its own functioning. However, while he still sought an 'organic negativity' that could resist this process Baudrillard (and Ballard) instead trace the potential exacerbation of simulated alterity.

The murder of Otherness, of alterity, produces a new obsession with it and its return in what Baudrillard describes as 'the melodrama of difference' (1993: 124-138). For Baudrillard this is particularly true of forms of identity politics and other proclamations of the 'right

to difference'. In fact this always reduces alterity to something negotiable and actually refuse radical alterity. We can see further evidence for this 'melodrama of difference' in the toleration and funding of so-called 'transgressive' art - for example, in the symptomatic fact that Charles Saatchi, who made his fortune in advertising (including for the British Conservative party), was the chief patron of the 'Sensation' exhibition of New British Art. In this case the 'melodrama' generates the requisite shock while also being used to market the singular 'new' achievements of British culture. Outside of the still relatively 'high' domain of art we could also consider the fashion for 'extreme' works in popular film. Since *Se7en* (1995), which explores the baroque tortures inflicted by a serial killer, a whole range of contemporary films have exploited the horror of torture: *Odishon [Audition]* (1999), *Saw* (2004), *Saw II* (2005), *Creep* (2004), *Wolf Creek* (2005), and *Hostel* (2006) (to mention only the most well-known). Often they are seen as a reaction against the postmodern irony that has been prevalent in horror film since *Scream* (1996). In a sense, though, they offer a meta-irony; to make a 'true' horror film rather than a pastiche is simply to pastiche the 'true' horror film. This is evident in the way in which recent explicit remakes of 1970s horror films, such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003; original 1974) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006; original 1977), have returned to negativity of the 'original' film only all the more effectively to simulate it. Any political negativity present in the original is lost through a focus on more and more precise representations of bodily suffering.

This then is a situation of administered alterity and the hypercritic responds not by withdrawing into a position of disgust, resentment, or resignation (see Virilio, 2003). Neither do they simply celebrate this new body-shock art as revealing the obverse 'truth' of our mediated culture. Instead they try to exceed both the new forms of simulated alterity and those forms of critique which rely on an alterity that has now disappeared. In fact despite the seeming pessimism of this analysis, in which every instance of alterity is 'always-already' simulated, Baudrillard insists on the 'Other's indestructibility' (1993: 146) and the need to reconstitute the radical Other 'starting with the fragments and tracing its broken lines, its lines of fracture' (1993: 155). The very capacity of simulation to simulate alterity actually threatens to overwhelm it, with radical alterity now taking a viral or catastrophic form that permeates simulation. Of course what remains contentious is not only the extent to which we accept this analysis, presented quite explicitly as a fiction, but also the mechanism or mechanisms by which this reversal, implosion or catastrophe is supposed to, or is, taking place. Here we re-encounter the notion of

crime, but this time a crime directed against the original crime and its cover-up. This is the exacerbative approach, not returning to 'organic negativity' or celebrating the 'truth' of negativity, but committing a new crime, which will exceed the original.

In Ballard's fiction this articulation of excess literalises Baudrillard's metaphor of crime. This is particularly true of the novel *Super-Cannes*, which begins with Paul Sinclair, an aviation journalist, and his young wife Jane, a doctor, travelling to the business park of Eden-Olympia on the Côte d'Azur. While Paul is recovering from the effects of a flying accident Jane's role is to replace the previous doctor David Greenwood, who went on a killing spree before killing himself. Almost immediately they arrive they encounter the threatening psychiatrist Wilder Penrose and take up residence in Greenwood's old villa. With time on his hands, and increasingly obsessed with the fate of Greenwood, Paul Sinclair begins to investigate the circumstances of the killings. He slowly uncovers evidence that suggests both a network of criminality in the business park and that Greenwood was deliberately executed. Although it comes as no surprise to the reader, there is deliberately little mystery in this novel, the psychiatrist Wilder Penrose is the orchestrating figure. Suffocated by the banality and conformity of the park, which is totally regulated and simulated, the executives who lived there had begun to fall ill with minor and persistent ailments. Penrose's solution was 'a controlled and supervised madness' (2001: 251) through a secret therapy programme of crime.

The novel 'stages' both the danger of simulation leading to the internal collapse of a social system and the way in which those who manage the system recognise this risk and 're-inject' alterity. Penrose's crime programme is directed outside the park in the form of violent raids (*ratissages*) against the local Arabs and blacks, robberies, and also child prostitution. It was Greenwood's role in administering this programme, and especially his recognition of his own paedophilic desires, which led to his attack on the park. As Paul discovers it was not actually a wild striking out but a deliberate attempt to both punish those responsible and to uncover the 'therapy' programme. The novel ends with Paul setting out to complete the task at which Greenwood fails - another crime to expose this surreptitious criminality. Certainly Ballard's novel is a fiction and, despite the seriousness of its subject matter, not without humour. However, Ballard's recent work also puts into play the necessity for an apocalyptic or catastrophic violence to exceed the regulated violence of contemporary culture (see Gasiorek, 2005: 202-214) - to literally blow apart the limits of the existing order. Again the only way to exceed licensed transgression is through an out-bidding by another hypertransgression.

This process recalls Baudrillard's analysis of potlatch, the gift exchange of so-called 'primitive' societies, as a process of 'continual higher bidding in exchange' (1998: 194). The excess emerges out of the acceleration of this bidding beyond any hope of containment or return. In the same way Paul Sinclair's crime answers, and out-bids, both the failed crime of David Greenwood and the organised criminality of Wilder Penrose. It also conforms to Baudrillard's description of the terrorist act as 'at the same time a model of simulation, a micro-model flashing with a minimally real event and a maximal echo chamber' (1983: 114). It belongs to the order of simulation, as it will be spectacular and an object of media interest, as was Greenwood's original crime. Also, it functions as a micro-model of dissident resistance against the organisation of alterity: the 'real event' here being the eruption of a 'real' alterity. Finally, as an echo chamber, it expands beyond the immediate context of the novel as fiction, resonating in the mediascape of contemporary culture. What is also crucial is that Ballard does not actually describe this act; it remains a virtual future left in all its potential ambiguity. Rather than provide another representation of radical alterity, bringing the crime back into simulation, Ballard's novel marks its 'presence' in the form of an absence. The perfect crime of the murder of alterity and its simulation is 'matched' or out-bid by another crime that never occurs, and may not actually occur, in the fictional universe.

This is very similar to the recent work of Baudrillard. Although he does not have the license of fiction for him the out-bidding of the perfect crime takes place in thought: '[o]ur only hope lies in a criminal and inhumane kind of thought' (2001: 61). The substance of Baudrillard's thought has, as we have seen, remained quite constant. Therefore I want to suggest that this 'criminal and inhumane kind of thought' for which he strives is rather more a question of form. Since what we might call Baudrillard's 'simulated sociology' (the last great work being *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976)), which at least mimicked existing academic forms, his work has increasingly been articulated through disruptive formal strategies. His use of aphorism, impressionistic or journalistic writing (the *bête noir* of academic writing), fragments, diaries, and so on, work towards a hypercritical writing, which is itself implosive or catastrophic. The reason for these strategies is, again, the refusal to simply stage or represent the 'indestructible Other'. Instead the fragmentary form of his work circulates around it, registering its destabilising and implosive effects through writing. This is Baudrillard game of seduction: seducing simulated alterity into contact with the distortive 'black hole' of radical alterity.

Of course it is worth noting that there is nothing particularly original

in these strategies per se, which can be found in thinkers like Pascal, Lichtenberg, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Lyotard. Each, in their own way, also chose these forms to explore the effects of a radical alterity which cannot be spoken of directly. However, unlike the tendency of these thinkers to put everything on the side of subjectivity Baudrillard insists on the 'Object' as the final figure of otherness (1993: 172). The Object is not present as such but functions as a 'vanishing point', and the role of theory is to mimic the challenge of the Object (1993: 173). Despite this difference the manoeuvre is fundamentally similar, and perhaps even closer to his contemporaries like Lévinas and Derrida. A radically fragmentary writing attests, through its fragmentation, gaps, and absences, to the 'strange attractor' that is the Object. The risk in this invocation of absolute alterity is that something will be lost: Baudrillard's concrete tracing of the effects of simulation and alterity in the mediascape. For all its fictionality and Baudrillard's studious avoidance of the scholarship of media studies his extreme thinking always anchored itself in the actuality of the present. In his choice of conventionally unconventional writing strategies and a conventionally unconventional thought of the Other this threatens to disappear in an unspecific and generalised invocation of absolute alterity.

In the terminology of Alain Badiou, we might locate Baudrillard as part of the dissident tradition of 'anti-philosophy' (see Hallward, 2003: 20-23). According to Badiou this 'tradition' poses an ineffable transcendent meaning against philosophy, and often does so in fragmentary anti-systematic forms. Although he does not deign to mention Baudrillard his list of anti-philosophers includes most of the figures mentioned above. Identifying unequivocally with philosophy, in a new rationalist form, Badiou argues that the fundamental orientation of anti-philosophy is theological. Lurking behind the transcendent meaning or figure of radical alterity is God. From this point of view Baudrillard's 'criminal thought' would be another attenuated religiosity, searching for an ever-receding mystical intuition of the 'Object'. Now Baudrillard himself, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, realised the danger of the 'anti-'position of simply being opposed to an existing form or discourse (1994: 19). In precisely the terms I have been discussing the 'anti-' position is one of simulated alterity, by means of which dead forms sustain themselves. Instead of destroying what it opposes, the pose of opposition supports and sustains it. The irony is that Baudrillard and Ballard's invocation of the extreme crime might all too easily sustain the system of simulation they are subjecting to hypercriticism. Rather than out-bidding and accelerating simulated alterity the danger is providing a new form of simulated alterity. They are both

transfixed by the possibility of a truly authentic criminal act always just out of reach. This is made even more ironic by the media fascination with 'true crime' - from CCTV footage of criminal acts to the fascinated horror of accounts of the activities of serial killers. Therefore I am suggesting that Baudrillard's 'criminal and inhumane kind of thought' is not criminal and inhumane enough.

Isn't the problem that this criticism simply leaves us in the position, so often made by critics of Baudrillard, of an absolute pessimism in the face of inescapable systems? 'Criminal thought' is a failure and so we have no escape from the reign of simulated alterity, other than a quite literal faith in the Other. I want to take another line of thought developed by Baudrillard as a line of flight out of this impasse of obsession with the radical crime. His earlier text *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (1983) avoids the language of radical alterity and the Other. Instead Baudrillard explores how the masses, the 'silent majorities', offer 'the strength of inertia, the strength of the neutral' (1983: 2). Rather than the masses incarnating any sort of excessive energy or reservoir of transgressive alterity it is their very muteness which threatens. The text makes an explicit break with sociology, including media sociology, by refusing the operation of the ascription of meaning. This refusal is undertaken in the name of the masses, who, like the new theorist (or post-theorist) are indifferent to meaning. Here we can see a strange connection traced between the indifference of the masses and the indifference of the theorist. Not that Baudrillard simply falls into the trap of being the spokesperson for this indifference, which would immediately nullify it. Instead the masses indicate the way forward for theory through passivity and inertia that refuses to respond to the relentless incitement of the media: 'Bombarded with stimuli, messages and tests, the masses are simply an opaque, blind stratum' (1983: 21). What is also different is the mode of challenge they offer. They do not exacerbate alterity through a further crime, or excessive violence, instead they follow the fatal strategy of hyperconformity.

As Baudrillard puts it 'You want us to consume - O.K., let's consume always more, and anything whatsoever; for any useless and absurd purpose' (1983: 46). Let's take the previous example I used of new extreme horror films. They seem to incarnate a logic of simulated alterity and invite either horrified disgust or perverse celebration, both operations of giving meaning to them. What about those spectators who take the films precisely as it often seem they are intended, as a game? The game is 'what have you got to show me?', 'how far will you go?', but rather than a perverse logic of escalation or desensitisation, it is a matter of indifference. Instead of searching for an alterity that would push beyond the screen, or even the viral

return of the alterity, say in forms of mimicking of the violence shown, we simply have a passive response to it as a game. There is no alterity here, but only play.

One of the so-called 'video nasties' of the 1970s, Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* (1972), had the tagline 'To avoid fainting, keep repeating "It's only a movie... It's only a movie..."'. The playful assumption of the tagline is that the audience will identify so much with what they are watching that they will be overcome unless they remind themselves that they are only watching a film. This sense of identification with the film has also been a common assumption in film theory, especially in its psychoanalytic forms². However, what if the audience does not have to keep repeating 'it's only a movie' to avoid fainting? What if they recognise this simulated alterity as what it is and hyperconform to it? They play a game with the film by not treating it as real, but at the same time conforming to its effects of horror. This does not involve a simple fascination with finding an authentic transgressive excess but rather a blank passivity. In some senses it might be suggested that the increasingly extremity of recent horror films responds to this audience inertia; as this over-involvement absorbs simulated alterity the filmmakers must 'up the stakes', only to encounter another level of inertia. Certainly these are my own highly speculative suggestions, but I think they indicate something that Baudrillard's own recent invocations of criminal thought and radical alterity step-back from in his own work. What is being avoided is banality in favour of the transgressive crime.

This argument for the banality of the media and the hyperconformity of the masses has implications for media studies that have not fully been exhausted. It is a familiar accusation that media studies is banal. In that most directly Baudrillardian of novels *White Noise* (1984) the character Murray, a lecturer on 'living icons', remarks 'I understand music, I understand the movies, I even see how comic books can tell us things. But there are full professors in the place who read nothing but cereal boxes'; his friend replies 'It's the only avant-garde we've got' (1999: 10). This exchange indicates something interesting, with a remark about the banality of the object being answered with the suggestion that this is our avant-garde. It identifies one of the key modes by which media studies has often justified itself: as an avant-garde political gesture. Therefore against the supposed banality of the object the media studies scholar replies by finding within that object, or more exactly in its use by the consumer, strategies of transgression or its synonyms (subversion, resistance, alterity, etc.). In this way the banality of the object is redeemed through its association with political or cultural transgression. At the same time the activity of the scholar is also redeemed from banality due to its

²For a convincing critique of this assumption see Smith (1995).

political import, which is revealed by the superior insight of the critic.

The 'criminal' gesture of Baudrillard and Ballard could easily be regarded as simply a hyperbolic extension of this line of argument. They claim that although the kind of everyday transgressions identified by media scholars are part of the society of simulated alterity there is still a radical alterity beyond representation. This might appear to be a radical 'out-bidding' but it falls within the same 'avant-garde' logic, as well as drawing radical alterity back into representation. The alternative I have suggested is to reply to the critic of the banality of media studies in the mode of hyperconformity: 'You accuse media studies of being banal? O.K. what I do is banal, more banal and useless than you could ever know!'. The advantage of this hyperconformist response lies not simply in disarming the critic. It refuses to justify the study of the media object in other terms (political or artistic, for example) and it refuses the frantic invocation of transgression. The account that Baudrillard and Ballard give of simulated alterity suggests that transgression is not actually transgressive; it is rather that transgression is boring. Although de Sade is often regarded as the original thinker of transgression he already came to this insight in his account of the final apathy of the libertine (see Klossowski, 1992: 28-34).

To play the game of transgression is to fall within an unacknowledged banality, as well as to continue to sustain the dead forms of contemporary culture. Contrary to the desire to find a real future crime we might follow Baudrillard's previous suggestion for a fatal strategy: becoming-banal.

Bibliography

- BALLARD, J. G. (2000). **Super-Cannes**. London: Flamingo.
- BAUDRILLARD, J. (1983) **In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities**. Trans. P. Foss, J. Johnston and P. Patton. New York: Semiotext(e).
- _____. (1993) **The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena**. Trans. J. Benedict. London and New York: Verso.
- _____. (1994) **Simulacra and Simulation**. Trans. S. F. Glaser. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- _____. (1996) **The Perfect Crime**. Trans. C. Turner. London and New York: Verso.
- _____. (1998) **'When Bataille Attacked the Metaphysical Principle of Economy'**, in F. Botting and S. Wilson (eds) *Bataille: A Critical Reader*. Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 191-195.
- _____. (2001) **'From Radical Incertitude, or Thought as Impostor'**, in: S. Lotringer and S. Cohen (eds) *French Theory in America*. London and New York: Routledge, 59-69.

- ____. (2005) **The Conspiracy of Art**. Ed. S. Lotringer. New York: Semiotext(e).
- DELILLO, D. (1999) **White Noise**. London: Picador.
- GASIOREK, A. (2005) J. G. Ballard. **Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press**.
- HALLWARD, P. (2003) **Badiou: A Subject to Truth**. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- KLOSSOWSKI, P. (1992) **Sade My Neighbour**. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. London: Quartet Books.
- PICCONI, P. (1978) **The Crisis of One-Dimensionality**. Telos 35: 43-54.
- SMITH, M. (1995) **Engaging Characters**. Oxford: Clarendon.
- VIRILIO, P. (2003) **Art and Fear**. Trans. Julie Rose. London and New York: Continuum.