The Structural Brakes of Manipulation or the Constructed Outside

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An often cited example of the limitations of perception goes like this: if we all wake up tomorrow and everything is ten times bigger than it was, we would not know it. The key word here is obviously "everything"—that is, including ourselves together with our perception apparatus. This simple example speaks to the impossibility of detecting change if everything is changed. In other words, the change concerns only the absolute parameters but preserves intact the initial relationships between things, the proportions, the relative values, structure as a whole. If we take this as the worst possible ideological manipulation model, in which, theoretically, the sensibilities and perceptions of the manipulated subject are altered together with the worsening conditions of reality (a reality from which he is not supposed to differentiate himself), we end up with absolute manipulation. What would make such manipulation absolute, if it were possible, is the fact that the interference of the system into the mind of the individual would be undetectable and thus bearable; in fact, not only bearable, but possibly satisfying from the point of view of the subject, who would have developed a subliminal need for the system, as may be the case with the contemporary Western living style of insidious hyper-consumption.

And yet, how can we distinguish between a subject's conditioned need for the system (expressed through multiple needs for what the system produces) from what the subject "really" needs? Marcuse, for example, defines true and false needs as objective categories,[1] based on the universal value of human freedom and the universal immorality of exploitation. But this formulation cannot solve the question of the ease and apparent freedom with

which the consumer can and does adapt to the wealth of so-called "late capitalism." It is no longer a question of the physical demands of capital on the worker's body. Now the issue is the uncritical acceptance of the calculated satisfaction provided by the dominant order (a satisfaction which is not merely material but cultural and intellectual as well) to the extent that it can lull the intellectual into thinking he is being critical when he is only voicing an already legislated discontent. Even though Marcuse's categories were not designed for the description of this problem, it seems that they still hold and, what is more, that they are indeed objective—albeit in a way that Marcuse would have probably found it difficult to approve of. But to claim any kind of distinction between true and false needs, we need to find a way for the subject to become conscious of his own manipulation—in other words, the question of the reality of needs is mainly a cognitive problem.

The subject cannot, as Marx pointed out, begin with consciousness: "man... possesses 'consciousness'; but, even so, not inherent, not 'pure' consciousness. From the start the 'spirit' is afflicted with the curse of being 'burdened' with matter."[2] If the reference of this statement is, perhaps heretically, transcribed from the base to the superstructure, it no longer will be a question of matter and spirit, of the role of nature versus the role of society, but a question of society against itself. Taking the natural, physical needs for granted, what can we say about the needs of the intellect, about the "true" and "false" cultural output of a society which has (let's assume) solved the problem of simple physical maintenance of its population?

In total manipulation, many theorists indicate that we cannot distinguish a point where the conditioning of the subject begins (point zero, so to speak). As Althusser puts it, "individuals are always-already subjects";[3] Horkheimer and Adorno express a similar concern: "The need which might resist central control has already been suppressed by the control of the individual consciousness."[4] This "already" is pervasive in Marxist thought; Marcuse's version of it is the term "introjection," defined as "a variety of relatively spontaneous processes by which a Self (Ego) transposes the 'outer' into the 'inner'" and the result is "an absorption of ideology into reality."[5] If that were the case, taken to its theoretical extreme, the individual would merge completely with the social and the subject would not be able to

define certain needs as personal (that is, unconditioned and "natural") and other needs as contingent (dispensable and artificial). In fact, Baudrillard says that "from the perspective of the satisfaction of the consumer, there is no basis on which to define what is 'artificial' and what is not."[6]

This statement seems intuitively wrong, because there are social and ideological constraints which the subject should not adapt to, situations where the "naturalization" would impose unnatural limitations on the mind. Experience also shows that total manipulation is impossible, at least through the work of what Althusser calls "ideological State apparatuses"[7] (which would include contemporary mass consumption), as distinguished from the brutal political force of State apparatuses—granted, the latter could conceivably apply physical force to condition the subject's thoughts and even perceptions (e.g., in *1984*, where the protagonist really begins to believe that he physically sees what his tormentor wants him to see). But this is not the issue here. Assuming a non-intrusive, subtle, ideological manipulation of needs by the system of consumption, how can the subject draw a line or make a distinction between his own, already manipulated reality and another possible, objective reality, or "the truth"?

Manipulation aims at a totality, a system, a structure free of internal contradictions and inconsistencies. In their definition of the culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno unambiguously call it a *system*: "a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part."[8] Baudrillard also has something to say about the systematic way in which the culture of consumption carries out its ideological reconnaissance and subversion of the subject: "Consumption is the virtual *totality* of all objects and messages presently constituted in a more or less coherent discourse"[9] (italics mine). Internal consistency is, in fact, Baudrillard's main requirement for a successful simulation model; it is most explicit in his quotation from Brecht, where the non-beer would be incongruous without a non-cigar—the reality of either one would disrupt the smooth operation of the illusion.[10] Any illusion can be successful and convincing (realistic) only if it is self-consistent and allows no internal flaw.

However, if we start from the premise (not arbitrarily chosen) that total manipulation of thought and perception is impossible, we arrive at the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that there must be clues to the illusion which are visible from within the illusion itself, so that the subject will al-

ways find an inconsistency, a flaw in the system. (In an apparently dubious but actually (and inadvertently) quite insightful rendering of this problem, the movie *The Matrix* deals with the transition from illusion to reality in the following way: the protagonist has to swallow what could only be an illusory, virtual, computerized pill which then turns out to be an element of reality as well. The ambiguous status of this one element here helps establish the connection with reality, or the place where the illusion breaks down.

Baudrillard claims that the distinction between illusion and reality in a simulation model is no longer tenable. In his annihilation of this dualism he postulates a structure which has become ephemeral, internalized by the subject, and still extant only in the syntax of consumption, which is perfectly operational without semantics (this is simplifying matters a bit; to be more precise, Baudrillard denies consumption even the status of syntax, preferring to call it simply a "code"[11]). The point is that consumption acts as a system and is no longer an individual act: "the system of objects," Baudrillard says, "imposes its own coherence" on society.[12] Even needs are no longer predicates of the individual consumer: "taken one at a time, needs are nothing... there is only the system of needs."[13]

It seems very tempting to argue against Baudrillard on this point, since his own criticism obviously belies his claims. In practice, it is possible for the individual to criticize the system using the tools of the system, to differentiate oneself from the mass culture one has already consumed and from the ideologies one has irreversibly inhaled. In practice, the absolute adaptation or manipulation is a fiction, just like any other completely self-contained model. The question is: how is it theoretically possible for the subject to become aware of his own manipulated nature in order to reject it? In other words, what is the mechanism by which the subjective can have an inkling of the objective?

These questions are not rhetorical. Stated in the terms of a cognitive problem, they find one very convincing answer in Žižek`s *Tarrying with the Negative*:

> Every tension between notion and reality, every relationship of the Notion to what appears as its irreducible Other encountered in the sensible, extra-notional experience, already is an intra-notional tension, i.e., al-

> ready implies a minimal notional determination of this 'otherness'... [t]he subject has in itself the measure which allows him to distinguish between what are merely 'subjective impressions' and what 'objectively exists.' What appears in and to our experience as extra-notional surplus, as the 'otherness' of the object irreducible to the subject's notional framework, impenetrable to it, is always-already the fetishistic, 'reified' (mis)perception of an inconsistency of the notion to itself.[14]

In other words, the subject does not have a flawlessly consistent subjective notion of reality, and it is precisely that flaw, the compromised totality of the picture, which tells each individual consciousness that there must be more to it, that there is an objective reality in addition to and beyond the picture in the subjective mind. In a sense, Žižek would agree with what Baudrillard had already proposed—that the simulation model, in this case from the subjective point of view, has to be self-consistent, perfect in its internal relations, immutable in its proportions in order to maintain the illusion—and this would be impossible. Any inconsistency within the notion, the subjective perception of the model, would reveal another reality behind it or, Žižek would say, *the* reality. In other words, the subject can never completely lose his bearings in reality and surrender the dualism of real/illusory to an omnivorous simulation because, it seems, there is always an outside. And if the simulation allows for a perception of an "outside," then it does not function as a simulation in the Baudrillardian sense any more; it ceases to be all-encompassing and self-contained and becomes merely one term in a binary equation, the other part of which is presumed to be nothing less than reality.

Paradoxically, the problem with ideology, as Althusser points out, is that it "has no outside."[15] Ideology is not supposed to allow the subject a position from which he can speak an unconditioned language. What would make simulation impossible, though, is the claim that there is always an outside, made visible from within the system by the existence of at least one element which would betray the dichotomy (illusion vs. something else) and define the alternative (going back to the initial example, that would be one element which would not grow ten times larger, and in this way would make the change visible—a testimony to an outside, or previous world).

There are a few places where the source of a flaw in the subject's perception of the system can be sought. One would think that, perhaps, the development of new material conditions of production, according to the classical Marxist model, would precede any changes in the superstructure, so that the subject could "see it coming" before being adapted to the new conditions. That is to say, there is a necessary delay, and it is only after this temporal suspension that ideology has the chance to police, in a gentle way and after the fact, the absolute adaptation of the mind to the already altered parameters of the body. But this theory, however powerful in its implications, remains a straightforward, stylized model of a much more complex and self-perpetuating relationship between base and superstructure. As many theorists (especially those from the Frankfurt school) have observed, ideology rarely lags behind enough to leave the mind untransformed and unconditioned by the time the new conditions are in place. In other words, ideology is never there merely to justify what has preceded it and to instill and discipline the reception and internalization of the economically established relationships. On the contrary, needs manifest themselves so as to be satisfied by the upcoming economic order, as if the subject has wished the new economic conditions into existence. Horkheimer and Adorno call this "the circle of manipulation and retroactive needs."[16] The reification of the subject by the culture does not follow the emergence of the culture but is uncannily simultaneous with it. The subject is never in a chronologically advantageous position to observe the emerging economic conditions "from the outside" or "from before."

So the clues must lie somewhere else; and it seems that an answer could be had by posing a question. The problem defined from the beginning has been the omnivorous *form* of consumerist discourse, which can tolerate and incorporate any content and use it for its purposes of hegemony. If everything is reified, reduced to the syntax of consumption, then the semantics no longer matters—it is no longer a question of meaning. Criticism, for example, can be criticism of content, but as long as it occupies a non-critical position within the structure, as long as it rides on a structurally inoffensive medium, as long as it fails to rupture the smooth operational routine of the whole, then it is formally un-critical; the system has absorbed it and is per-

haps using it as a Baudrillardian simulacrum of the third order, which is in an apparently disruptive but actually constructive relationship to the system. Horkheimer and Adorno give the following example: "Whenever Orson Wells offends against the tricks of the trade, he is forgiven because his departures from the norm are regarded as calculated mutations which serve all the more strongly to confirm the validity of the system."[17] A similar example would be a television commercial with content ostensibly critical of television commercials but which can still function as a commercial. Marcuse complains that "such modes of protest and transcendence are no longer contradictory to the *status quo* and no longer negative."[18]

This means that criticism, along with all other products, is not read as criticism, or, more precisely, *because* it is read it enters discourse which it is trying to denounce; it becomes a Derridean metonymic piece of a larger structure, and this structure is the culture of consumption. As Baudrillard would see it, every individual piece of the structure functions for the ulterior motives of the syntax of the whole, according to its place in relation to the other pieces (with the purpose of continuing the discourse, to relate, to exchange ideas), and not for the intrinsic motives of semantics (the use-value of thought): "what is consumed are not objects but the relation itself."[19] All possible content will then necessarily become a confirmation of the dominant, universal form.

Therefore, the solution, the gap between the subject and environment which would allow for an awareness of an inconsistency within the totality of consumption must be sought at the level of form, not content. Since we are, as Baudrillard says, "becoming functional"[20] or part of what he calls "a relentless function,"[21] that is where we should look for the solution. In other words, it can be shown that totality is structurally impossible (even though it is sometimes tempting to equate totality with structure itself).

That is to say, in the face of the enormous, anonymous, subtle, almost impalpable but very palatable, always willingly accepted and inoffensively pervasive system of mass consumption, it is possible that the individual subject does not need any special critical insight or qualification other than his position as a subject within the system to resist this overwhelming and painless wave of manipulation. Even as he invites it, buys it, consumes it, gets pleasure from it, he cannot be totally immersed in or conditioned by the

structure and this is possible (unavoidable, really) by virtue of his occupying, structurally, the position of the subject; that is, the only non-structured point in the whole from the point of view of the subject. This is what would allow one to see a flaw in an otherwise completely self-consistent illusion since the incision into the totality comes precisely from the subjective position from which it is viewed. As Žižek puts it: "there is no neutral 'zero-point' from which society can be conceived as a Whole."[22] It does not matter much how far the commercial machine can see or how deep it can reach into the individual mind—if that mind cannot become conscious of itself (that is, as a phenomenon and noumenon at the same time, which is impossible[23]), then the mind will never be able to see itself as part of the totality. In Žižek`s more elaborate phraseology, "the spot of the... picture is thus strictly constitutive of the subject; the subject qua subject of the look 'is' only in so far as the... picture he is looking at is inherently 'incomplete.'"[24] This is the equivalent of the simpler claim that the eye cannot see itself. From the point of view of the individual totality will be incomplete because it will not seem to include that individual.

This does not have to be a question of reality or illusion—it is immaterial whether the person is actually part of the system according to the system; it is enough for the subject to be incapable of seeing his own place in the totality. The subject can never be completely subsumed under the structure, because he is structurally unable to believe in totality. For the subject, totality will have a flaw by definition.

This goes against more optimistic (pessimistic?) Marxist theories which see the only salvation in the honing of the critical capacities of the subject, in his education and in his enlightenment. But the question here is, given any subject (not necessarily one versed in advanced Marxism), a subject who enjoys consumption, and given the most powerful and least conspicuous hegemony available so far in history, is there a way to prevent the total collapse of the subject, a complete extinction of the self, to prevent the true needs from turning into false ones? There seems to be a way, although it goes against some mainstream Marxist formulations. What was the main problem for and with earlier Marxist models was the impossibility of grasping totality, including one's own place and role in it as Lukacs' idea that

"for if from the vantage point of a particular class the totality of existing society is not visible... then such a class is doomed to play only a subordinate role. It can never influence the course of history in either a conservative or progressive direction."[25] The task of the intellectual avant-garde, Lukacs continues, is to point out that "the superiority of the proletariat must lie exclusively in its ability to see society from the centre, as a coherent whole."[26] The impossibility of such an omniscient perspective seemed detrimental to the very premises of the Marxist tradition; it now turns to the theory's advantage since the inability to acquire a notion of totality is the only thing that can save the subject from that totality.

The subject still has a specific perspective—this is guaranteed by the consensus of virtually all theories, which grant the subject at least a "false consciousness,"[27] or an illusory sense of freedom: "Everybody is guaranteed formal freedom."[28] It is formally irrelevant whether this freedom is real; as long as we postulate a subjective sense of freedom or a false consciousness, the subject will never be capable of viewing or apprehending a totality—there will always appear to be a gap somewhere in the fabric of the absolute since an objective perspective, they believe, is not possible ("objective perspective" being a contradiction in terms). Therefore, the system will never be internally consistent, as long as the subject is within it; and the whole idea of manipulation in the first place is to keep the subject and his perception within the system. As the whole loses consistency, any structure (including Marxism itself) which depends on absolute order and a notion of totality loses credibility and will necessarily invite speculation as to what remains "outside"—even if there is no outside. In this case, doubt itself, in a mildly Cartesian but mostly Baudrillardian way, will create an outside. The irony is, there does not even have to be a real outside, because the suspected inconsistencies in the totality are generated by the perspective of the subject, i.e., from the inside. That is how the subject can construct an artificial "outside," even though the ideology can construct an artificial "inside" to confine the subject. And just as ideology cannot look at anything without presupposing itself, the subject cannot consider ideology without the perception of inconsistency and incompleteness in his integration into the totality.

The more successful an illusion is, the sharper the sense of individual autonomy it has to instill in the subject. The most advanced simulations in

the real world, in fact, depend on intensifying the subjective perspective and not on obliterating it. For example, computer games enhance the illusion of live action not by creating a sense of a complete objective world, but by enhancing the *subjective* point of view of the player and, in a way, limiting his perspective. By excluding, in effect, part of what would otherwise have been a complete but flat picture, the visible field acquires new depth, and that is the depth of the subject, paradoxically achieved by narrowing, and not expanding, the viewer's perspective. If the player is to feel as if he is inside the game, and not just watching the little figures move on the screen, he has to sacrifice part of his vision (the one having to do with his own position in space) but for which he is amply rewarded. The same goes with theory.

Structurally, then, "true" and "false" needs are indeed distinguishable because the minimal distance between inside and outside is kept. But the "true" needs do not have to be "natural" as well, in the sense of grounded in some solid "reality." On the contrary, when the subject creates a notion (possibly non-existent) outside of ideology, this notion is itself virtual and definitely artificial. However, the constructed "outside" structurally functions (i.e., regardless of the content of reality) as one of the true needs, a need inherent (minus the connotations of specific content) in the subject by virtue of the position he occupies. The "outside" then is both true and artificial, and it can be distinguished from the artificial but false needs, which the system wants the subject to internalize. In other words, the Althusserian idea of an ideology without outside is above all the expression of the wish of ideology itself, which creates a virtual, artificial, ostensibly outside-proof sphere, where everything has to exist on the inside and be internalized by the subject. But the subject responds to that by constructing an outside (equally artificial and functional) because now the struggle against the system has to be taken to the level of form. What Baudrillard says about use-value and exchange value can be applied to true and false needs as well—they do not differ in terms of quality because their content-value is equated (that is, use-value and true needs lose their content) or even negated in "the structural articulation of the two terms."[29] What matters now is how these terms relate to each other structurally. But it is precisely this relation which helps differentiate the two terms so that they remain "two" and are not for-

mally interchangeable, even though their content may well be shifted from one to the other. In other words, an ideology can preach anything, but regardless of the quality of its ideas, it would never be able to erase the notion of an alternative to itself, an "outside." (This has, perhaps, a negative side as well since it makes utopian visions as impossible as any other self-contained system.) The subject is the eternal skeptic, forever bound to seek something else, something more than what he already has. And that makes ideology forever *insufficient*.

The concepts of inside and outside then may be seen as formalistic, reified, objectified in the sense that the "inside" does not really denote any content but only the structurally ambiguous position of the subject within the structure. Still, these two concepts can be distinguished and, in turn, help distinguish between true and false needs. We can say that these categories are objective, as Marcuse maintains, but only in the sense that they are not arbitrary. The essentialist claim of Marxism that true needs must necessarily be "natural" is more questionable and will depend on a precise definition of nature, which does not seem available at this time in Marxist thought. In short, clues to the illusion from within the illusion are possible, and they (in a way curiously parallel to the solution shown in *The Matrix*) are also illusory. On the other hand, these clues can become as real as any simulated reality merely by virtue of the observation that the totality is *consistently* flawed from the point of view of the subject, and this consistency confers a reality on the inconsistency of any ideology.

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1 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964), 6.

2 Karl Marx, "The German Ideology" in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. Ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 158.

3 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 176.

4 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972), 121.

5 Marcuse, 10 – 11.

[6] Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 40.
[7] Althusser, 142.
[8] Horkheimer and Adorno, 120.
[9] Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 22.
[10] Quoted in Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 81.
[11] Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 19.
[12] Ibid., 15.
[13] Ibid., 43.
[14] Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 20.
[15] Althusser, 175.
[16] Horkheimer and Adorno, 121.
[17] Ibid., 129.
[18] Marcuse, 14.
[19] Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 22.
[20] Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 29.
[21] Baudrillard, *Gulf War*, 31.
[22] Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), 125.
[23] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 18
[24] Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, 89
[25] Georg Lukacs, "Class Consciousness" in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 52.
[26] Ibid., 69.
[27] Ibid., 50.
[28] Horkheimer and Adorno, 149.
[29] Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 101.