# Jean Baudrillard's Critique of Jakobson's Model of Communication

This lecture will focus on Jean Baudrillard's critical remarks on modeling communication in his essay "Requiem for the Media" in *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. (( All references to this essay are from the Charles Levin translation in *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, New York: Telos Press, 1981.)) The "requiem" of the title refers to Baudrillard's global critique of the possibility of a media theory – "there is no theory of the media" – which has remained, as he states, either empirical or mystical: Marx or McLuhan. (165) What if McLuhan was correct that Marx was obsolete in his lifetime? Here Baudrillard's strokes are characteristically broad in asking what one gets when media/ communication are grafted onto the Marxist analysis of production and social conflict? His answer is twofold: i) a generalization of the commodity form that encompasses all of social life but in the absence of a critique "rendered unthinkable," within the terms of its theory, of the political economy of the sign – the latter would be Baudrillard's contribution; or ii) admission of the partiality of Marxism and its non-generalizability (that is, what is said of material production is not transferable to non-material production and, importantly, that the theory of production is in this way tied to its object [material production] – it is "homogeneous with it," [165] which is what makes it non-transferable). Baudrillard concludes that there is no viable Marxist theory f the media, even though there is no shortage of Leftist media theory and analysis. Now, let's revisit for a moment Baudrillard's version of what McLuhan wrote about Marx: "In his candid fashion, he is saying that Marx, in his materialist analysis of production, had virtually circumscribed productive forces as a privileged domain from which

language, signs, and communication in general found themselves excluded. In fact, Marx does not even provide for a genuine theory of railroads as ‘media’, as modes of communication: they hardly enter into consideration. And he certainly established no theory of technical evolution on general, except from the point of view of production – primary, material, infrastructural production as the almost exclusive determinant of social relations.” (164) Baudrillard’s reference is to the opening pages of McLuhan’s *War and Peace in the Global Village* where McLuhan is pointing to two paradoxes: the first being that anti-communism and Red scares are ridiculous because communism, in his specific sense of the term , has already happened and adequately describes our own electric , tribal service environment: “By Karl Marx’s times, a ‘communism’ resulting from such services [“by the middle of the nineteenth century the extent of environmental services available to the workers of the community greatly exceeded the scale of services that could be monopolized by individual wealth”] so far surpassed the older private wealth and services contained within the new communal environment that it was quite natural for Marx to use it as a rear-view mirror for his Utopian hopes.” ((With Quentin Fiore, *War and Peace in the Global Village*, New York: Bantam, 1968, p. 5.)) The rear-view mirror shows what is behind us – communism already belongs to yesterday in Marx’s time – and is the basis upon which Marx goes forward. So, Marx developed his analysis on the basis of an old nvironment and for him the new environment remained invisible (his inability to see railroads as ‘media’). But this catches Marx in a predicament which, according to McLuhan, is a “human bias.” ((.*Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, eds. M. Molinaro, C. McLuhan, W. Toye, Toronto: OUP, 1987, p. 325 [McLuhan-Watson].)) The corollary of this bias is the claim that a “commune-ist” environment already existed, it was Marx’s rear-view mirror, yet this made him blind to the then new media around him. McLuhan is clearer on this point elsewhere. In an interview McLuhan states: “Marx paid no attention to the environmental effects created by new products. He

studied only work, market, products. The fact that typewriter as product completely revolutionized all administration and social life and the place of women in society was not his bag. In this respect Marx is exactly like Smith, Ricardo, Mill and the rest. None of the classical economists, including Marx, has ever studied the effects of new products in creating environments." ((“McLuhan on Russia: An Interview [By Gary Kern],” *The McLuhan Dew-Line Newsletter* 2/6 1970: np.)) In short, Marx was transfixed by the view in his rear-view mirror of commune-ism. McLuhan continues: “Communism was achieved in England before the birth of Marx without the benefit of ideology. When public service environments available to ordinary men exceed the means of private wealth to produce for itself, Communism, practically speaking, exists. Today in the West, multi-billion dollar service environments are free for all. The steak line and soup line have merged. …” McLuhan had little sense of social stratification and almost no grasp of political economy, and this why Arthur Kroker quite rightly refers to him as a deeply compromised thinker, a “missionary” of the corporate world: capitalism as a step towards the “Pentecostal condition” of “general cosmic consciousness.” Capitalism would be subsumed by technology as it realized the Catholic humanist vision of McLuhan: “If McLuhan was a deeply compromised thinker, then it was because his Catholic humanism allowed him to subordinate, and forget, the question of the private appropriation of technology… And what was … tragic and not comic about his intellectual fate was simply this: it was precisely the control over the speed, dissemination, and implanting of new technologies by the corporate command centres of North America which would subvert the very possibility of an age of ‘creative freedom’.” ((Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/Grant/McLuhan*, Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1984, p. 82.)) The “commune-ism” that McLuhan found already present before Marx’s birth went completely unanalyzed because it merely served as a step in the progressive development of extensions of

humankind (mechanical outstripped by electrical) in the movement toward the McLuhanatic Utopia.

Two blindnesses, two utopias: Marx is not so easily subdued when it comes to his thinking of technology as recent renovations of the "Fragment on Machines" from the *Grundrisse* have shown. ((Karl Marx, "Fragment on Machines," in *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, New York: Vintage, 1973, Notebook VI, pp. 690-95. See also Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, trans. Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan, Maurizio Viano, New York: Autonomedia, 1991, p. 139ff; Paolo Virno, "The Ambivalence of Disenchantment" and Franco Piperno, "Technological Innovation and Sentimental Education" in *Radical Thought in Italy" A Potential Politics*, eds. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 21ff and 123ff.)) Here we have a vision of cybernetics (the transformation of machinery into a system) based on a theory of the automaton ("a moving power that moves itself") and most importantly the displacement of workers to mere "conscious linkages." Marx already saw that "the production process has ceased to be a labour process … labour appears … merely as conscious organ, scattered among the individual living workers at numerous points of the mechanical system." Welcome to the machine: objectified labour confronts the vestiges of living labour. This "necessary tendency" of the absorption of knowledge (science) into (fixed) capital where it is materialized rather than in labour: "In machinery, knowledge appears as alien, external to him… the worker appears superfluous to the extent that his action is not determined by [capital's ] requirement." It didn't work out this way: Marx's dream of emancipation has turned out to be basis of domination: the code and its manifestations in information technology and genetic manipulation. The "social brain" has been totally appropriated by capital.

With this digression behind us let's look more closely at Baudrillard's argument which is aimed at Hans Magnus Enzenberger in particular. TheLeft, Baudrillard claims, dreams of taking over the media and releasing it from the ideological manipulations of capital; the assumption is that the media's structure is fundamentally egalitarian and if it were rrun by revolutionaries it could become fully democratic. Yet the media, because it is beyond material production, remains a bit of a "social mystery" for the Left, like signs in general. Many Leftist intellectuals like Enzenberger points out that young militants either capitulate to new media, exploring it "apolitically" through subcultural and underground formations, or revert in the face of it to "archaic modes of communication" such as the use of hand presses and other "artisanal means." (167) Baudrillard's analysis seems quaint in the era of diverse alternative media and Web-based activism. But it is already present in Baudrillard's use of a reproach of Enzenberger's that the students in May 68 should not have occupied the the conservative and tradition-bound Ecole des Beaux Arts, but focused on the state-run ORTF (Baudrillard thinks that this occupation changed nothing anyway, 170, n 16) something of the argument that he is going mount against the seductions of simulated mediatic communication and the charm of the "archaic" and "low tech."

Let's not get ahead of ourselves. There is a need to liberate the liberatory elements of the media and technology (hitherto frozen by capitalism), according to the Left as Baudrillard represents it. But how can this be accomplished, Baudrillard argues in exposing a contradiction in Enzenbeger's thought, when media (like television) is already inherently massive and serves the many? Is not the medium the mass-age? Is not the attempt to liberate media, if socialists successfully acquire their own wavelengths or bandwidths (Enzenberger thought that they might also build their own transmitters like radio pirates), thus fighting against the mass for the sake of the few, against, that is, what is inherent about the structure of

the media which is socialist, contradictory? (168) Here we see one of Baudrillard's favorite contractions: socialist and social: Why fight … if the media realize themselves in socialism?" (168) After all, Enzenberger invests a great deal in the observation that "the new media are egalitarian in structure. Anyone can take part in them by a simple switching process." Enzenberger was, before the fact, dreaming of a networked society of political subversion; McLuhan was, for him, a charlatan. It is a dream that is remarkably close to McLuhan's since neither investigated the stratifications that shape *access* to so-called new media nor did they interrogate their respective senses of "universal"- the sempiternal glance of angels beyond language and the code or the "universal system" of "reversible circuits," decentralized, mobilizing against consumer spectacle, and collective (even a little terrorist). ((Hans Magnus Enzenberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," in Video Culture, ed. John Handhardt, Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986, pp. 96-123.))

Just as Marxists dream of restoring the use value of objects by stripping them of their exchange value, Baudrillard maintains, of the media they believe it is possible to restore its communicative truth (open and democratic), rescuing it from the distortions of the dominant ideology. This presupposes, Baudrillard thinks, that ideology already exists somewhere is simply channeled (that is, distribution) through media, which also makes the latter a mere container of messages. Rather, for Baudrillard, ideology is embedded in the social relations the forms of media dictate and induce. Media are thoroughly ideological ("the very operation of exchange value," 169) and Baudrillard rejects Enzenberger's presupposition of the ideological neutrality of media. This does not make Baudrillard pessimistic simply because he rejects at once techno-optimism (McLuahn) and dialectical optimism (Enzenberger). ((Baudrillard, "The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, Oxford: Stanford UP and Polity, 1988, pp. 207-8.)) Media ideology functions

at the level of form in the separations established between senders and receivers and the non-communication between them. Already then in these last few remarks on ideology and media form we can see that Baudrillard's critique of Enzenberger was also a critique of an uncritical deployment of the terms of the model of communication, that is, as a technical device, a relayer of messages, and thus of communication as a technical rather than a social problem (affecting a decisive "social division").

Mass media "fabricate non-communication." (169) The social division that they establish precludes a genuine space of reciprocal exchange governed by responsibility, a "personal, mutual correlation in exchange." This is why Baudrillard in not truly pessimistic: he finds an alternative in this transitive space of exchange and this in turn changes significantly how he sees communication and its modeling: "We must understand communication as something other than the simply transmission-reception of a message, whether or not the latter is considered reversible through feedback." (169-70) Media makes exchange impossible, makes real communication impossible. Sure, media permit all sorts of simulated, participatory responses that are integrated into its transmission systems. But media, as a mechanism of social control, "always prevents responses" of the kind outlined in anthropological terms by Baudrillard. Mediatic non-communication is unilateral, excludes response, and monopolizes speech. Borrowing and extracting from literature on gift exchange in aboriginal societies, Baudrillard explains that power accrues to those who can give without being repaid, and this unilaterality disrupts the circuit of exchange and the reciprocal space in which giving-receiving-returning takes place as obligatory, often for fear of the consequences of breaking the circuit, but perhaps in the seizure of power as a declaration of war.

Baudrillard differentiates between attempts to democratize, subvert and restore some measure of transparency to media (i.e., through

redistribution) *and* breaking the monopoly on speech: “This is why the only revolution in this domain – indeed, the revolution everywhere: the revolution *tout court* – lies in restoring this possibility of response. But such a possibility presupposes an upheaval in the entire existing structure of the media.” (170)

This thesis is grounded in Baudrillard’s earlier work on the theory of symbolic exchange. It is worth revisiting the two pillars of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*named in its title. Baudrillard’s radical anthropology attempts to recover death and use it as a symbolic counter-gift (often in the form of suicide) that forces modern institutions, unilaterally giving the gifts of work as a slow death, social security, and the maternal ambiance of consumption, to receive and respond to in kind with their own deaths. Summoning the code or the system, in Baudrillard’s street rhetoric, to receive the counter-gift, makes it strange to itself in being drawn onto the symbolic plane in which exchange is an incessant circuit of giving, receiving, responding in kind and with interest. The failure to receive the counter-gift and repay in kind is loss of face – spirit, wealth, health, rank and power. ((Baudrillard, *L’échange symbolique et la mort*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976; *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, London: Sage, 1993.))

Death must be regained through ritual and regained from agencies of Thanatos such as coroners, funeral parlors, and priests. Baudrillard appropriates from anthropological sources symbolically significant practices (those of the Sara in Chad described by Robert Jaulin, for instance) that he adapts to his own ends, underlining that death is not biological but initiatic, a rite involving a reciprocal-antagonistic exchange. Baudrillard extends this analysis to the desocialization and ghettoization of the dead in the West and tries to lift the social control over death that separates it from life because it is from this separation that all subsequent alienations arise.

To bring this theory up top date, it is evident that it is the basis for Baudrillard's controversial reflection on the events of 9/11 in his essay "L'esprit du terrorisme." ((Baudrillard, "L'esprit du terrorisme," *Le Monde* (2 novembre 2000), http://www.lemonde.fr/article/0,5987,3232–239354-,00.html; in translation see "The Spirit of Terrorism," trans. Rachel Bloul (2001), http://awake.sparklehouse.com/downloads/papers/baud_terr.html and "L'esprit du terrorisme," trans. Donovan Hohn, *Harper's* (February 2002): 13-18.)) The suicide planes that embedded themselves in the twin towers of the WTC were symbolic forces of disorder issuing counter-gifts of mass death. The spirit of terrorism is that of symbolic exchange: "the terrorist hypothesis is that the system itself suicides in response to the multiples challenges of death and suicide." But it is not so much that death is *controlled* but rather that it is *excluded* in the monopoly of global power of the "good, transparent, positive, West," a system whose ideal is "zero death," as Baudrillard puts it, and which at all costs neutralizes the symbolic stakes of reversibility and challenge. To which the terrorists respond with a "counter-offensive" of suicide: of symbolic and sacrificial death, "much more than real." A kind of death that the West cannot grasp except by placing a value on it, by "calculating" its exchange (against Paradise; against support for their families through individual heroic martyrdom, etc.).

Media without response pose and answer their own questions "via the simulated detour of a response" (171) such as a poll or referendum. Likewise, the consumer "takes and makes use of" but does not give, reimburse and exchange reciprocally. A functional object does not require a response, Baudrillard maintains, because it has already integrated it in its own terms (controlling rupture), and thus permits no room for play, what he characterizes as "as reciprocal *putting into play*." (171) What he suggests here revisits his early hypotheses about the destiny of the object's perfection in automatism: the user does nothing (the human body becomes

progressively less and less of a determining factor as physical effort wanes as a requirement of an object's "manipulation.") ((Baudrillard, *Le système des objets*, Paris: Gallimard; *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict, London: Verso, 1996.)) Baudrillard's next example is that of television as social control: give every citizen a television, without worrying about what is on it, or that it might become a telescreen. The important point is that*"people are no longer speaking to each other*, that they are definitely isolated in the face of speech without response." (172) Baudrillard's McLuhanite formalism is extreme in this example. But it is part and parcel of a rejection of content as potentially revolutionary. This aligns Baudrillard with one tradition of interpreting the general impact of the model of communication: it negated content-based analysis of messages (behaviorally grounded and semiologically naïve), especially those on television, for the sake of the analysis of the televisual sign. ((Television semiotics has many nuances and practitioners; for instance see the narratological approach of Arthus Asa Berger, " Semiotics and TV," in *Understanding Television*, ed. Richard P. Adler, New York: Praeger, 1981, pp. 91-114; or John Fiske's hybrid analysis with the recuperation of resistance, *Television Culture*, London: Routledge, 1987.)) For his part, Baudrillard does not align activities undertaken in so-called isolation with resistance, no matter how it is conceived (fantasy, irony, valued interiority, etc., in short, all of the pleasures and politics of the personal recuperated in one way or another by cultural studies).

There is a further matter that requires some clarification before we continue. Baudrillard's book *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* exposed the ideological dimension of use value, repository of the true idealism in Marxism, exposing it as an abstraction that was hidden under the cloak of immediacy and particularity and, despite Marx, already infused with equivalence. For Baudrillard, use value was not incomparable; in fact, use value was an effect of the system and a convenient alibi that allowed it

to refer to objective reality. Use value, Baudrillard maintained, is grounded in a naturalness based on utility (immediacy of one's relationship with things). This was actually highly metaphysical, Baudrillard argued, and ambiguous, and it is here that he turned the tables on Marx by showing that use value was an abstraction rather than connected with the concrete and particular (the latter being the false front behind which it hid).

Thus, when Baudrillard writes that Marxists dream of recovering the use value of things beyond the logic of equivalence that governs the exchange of commodities, it is a dream that must remain unfulfilled. And so it goes with the media. The dreams of May '68 and the Yippies in the US – all those who have attempted to reverse the media by appropriating it for different ends have operated under a "strategic illusion."

Yes, the media spread news of the actions of the student revolutionaries in May '68, but this does not mean that the media were subversive. They were on the contrary Baudrillard argues discharging their responsibility of habitual social control. The media did this by maintaining its form: "By broadcasting the events in the *abstract universality* of public opinion, they imposed a sudden and inordinate development on the movement of events; and through this forced and anticipated extension, they deprived the original movement of its own rhythm and of its meaning. In a word: they short-circuited it." (173). Symbolic action, like initiation, has a rhythm, a "scansion" of reciprocity. ((See my comparison with rhythm in Julia Kristeva's theorization of the semiotic in *Undisciplined Theory*, London: Sage, 1998, pp. 27-30.)) When rhythm is stripped of its accents, something original and singular is lost; when the events are reduced to the frames of broadcasting and reportage, when potentialities are frozen, transversality and spontaneity captured and channeled, symbolic action is annulled ("eviscerated'): meaning is no longer produced but *re*produced;

transgression becomes exchange value; politics is depoliticized. Where did the symbolic take place? Baudrillard explains:

*The real revolutionary media during May were the walls and their speech, the silk-screen posters and the hand-painted notices, the street where speech began and was exchanged – everything that was an immediate inscription, given and returned, spoken and answered, mobile in the same space and time, reciprocal and antagonistic. (176)*

Artisanal production; graffiti; homemade signage; to-and-fro banter and discussion; new modes of collective activity and expression: symbolic reciprocity destroys media (as intermediary, as technical structure, as social form). A sobering thought: since use value is implicated in the domain of value, only symbolic exchange stands beyond mediatic communication (only it is incomparable). Indeed, it is the unmasking of use value that leads Baudrillard into a theory of symbolic exchange.

Baudrillard's critique of the "enlightened Marxist" Enzenberger continues with reference to his presupposition of a model of communication, formalized by Jakobson, also shared by the dominant ideology against which he struggles. In fact the theory is widely accepted – in the mass culture, in universities, etc. Examples are not hard to find. Think of John Fiske and John Hartley's uncritical acceptance and grafting onto their analysis of the functions of television of the six functions defined by Jakobson as if these perfectly describe the medium's semiotic. The authors even go so far as to suggest that not only can all the functions be seen at work on television but "indeed many of its messages seem to serve little purpose other than to perform them." ((John Fiske and John Hartley, "The Functions of Television," in *Transmission: Theory and Practice For a New Television Aesthetics*, ed. Peter D'Agostino, New York: Tanam Press, 1985, p. 38.)) For Baudrillard, however, "the entire conceptual infrastructure of

this theory is ideologically connected with dominant practice… .” (178) Failure to recognize this has bogged down radical and critical perspectives.

Baudrillard’s version of the model is simple

TRANSMITTER – MESSAGE – RECEIVER

(ENCODER – MESSAGE – DECODER

Baudrillard does not so much as summarize Jakobson as telescope his concepts into a fatal formula: the “vectorization” of a communication process into a single message issued undirectionally from either encoder to decoder or decoder to encoder. Communication is always reducible, claims Baudrillard, to this “simple unity” which, despite claims to objectivity and scientificity, is built on “ideological categories that express a certain type of social relation, namely, … one speaks and the other doesn’t … one has the choice of the code, and the other only liberty to acquiesce or abstain.” (178-9). Much of the analysis undertaken in *For A Critique* (137) exposed the ideological imbalances lurking in what appeared to be structural correspondences. For instance, the homology between the commodity and the sign. Exchange value and the signifier have a ‘strategic value’ greater than the ‘tactical value’ of use value and the signified. Binary oppositive structuration is never symmetrical since each antecedent term produces its own ‘alibi’ as its consequent term. Use value and the signified are ‘effects’ or ‘simulation models’ of their antecedent terms. They are produced respectively by Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism in terms of exchange value alone, while semiolinguistics privileges the signifier as its principle of circulation and regulated interplay.

The kind of communication that Jakobson’s model suggests is presented by Baudrillard in terms of single meaning and unidirectionsality (of

messages), but also, importantly, of a mutually exclusive polarity of encoder and decoder – artificially held apart and just as artificially reunited by an “intermedium” of the coded message: it is this intermedium that maintains both “in a respective situation … at a distance from one another….” (179) The social relation in question excludes reciprocity. In an interesting footnote (179, n. 27), Baudrillard directly criticizes the notion of “contact” : “The two terms are so faintly present to each other that it has proven necessary to create a “contact” category to reconstitute the totality theoretically!” The code/message terrorizes communication by positioning the encoder and decoder in an “abstract separateness” and privileging the sender. Jakobson’s phatic function in his model of communication, for instance, is evidence for Baudrillard of the distance between the poles and an alibi for the communication that the model promises but actually simulates. Baudrillard claims that it is the codewhich speaks since it dictates the unidirectional passage of information and guarantees the legibility, univocality (or multivocality for it hardly matters for Baudrillard who dismisses ambiguity and polysemy) and “autonomous value” of the message, conceived as information.

Elsewhere in *Seduction* Baudrillard has had much to say about the phatic function as it hypertrophies in the cold universe of information systems. The zero degree of contact in the tele-dimension: tele-phasis. By the time Jakobson revisited the concept he had lost its original symbolic sense in Malinowski, Baudrillard maintains. That is, it no longer involved ceremonial challenges and ritual responses: “Langauge has no need for ‘contact’: it is *we* who need communication to have a specific ‘contact’ function, precisely because it is eluding us.” ((Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer, Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1990, p. 164.)) The phatic function “analytically restores” what is missing in communication, far, far removed from the “frayed spaces” of symbolic exchange in the pulsing (beyond meaning) “tele space” of networked terminals (Minitel, television,

Telidon…) at the ends of which classical assumptions about "inter-individual logic" no longer make sense.

Under the guise of admitting ambiguity and even polyvocality, the model excludes an ambivalent exchange between persons. Ambivalence makes the model collapse because there is no code for it; "the entire formulation exists only to avert this catastrophe." (179) But in *Seduction* what makes the model collapse is what once for Baudrillard made it metaphysical: the absence of *determinate* positions: "Only *terminals* in a position of *ex-termination*." Terminals are not interlocutors and the binary code of 0/1 is no longer language. ((Ibid., p. 165.)) Symbolic *responses* between persons take place "beyond the code" (180), thus overcoming separation ("abstract bipolarity") and subsequent articulation ("*diktat* of the code").

Efforts to make the communication process more "supple" (181) by breaking down and multiplying the poles, introducing reversibility, multiple switching points, democratizing the transmission pole by having "*everyone become a manipulator*" (182) are all inadequate, argues Baudrillard. The core issue is "an original form of exchange" that is irreducible to technical and dialectical overcomings, as well as every effort to substitute a more radical content or, as Eco suggests, new subversive decoding practices (183). A subversive reading is still a reading, writes Baudrillard, and it doesn't address the symbolic need for simultaneity without a message passing from one pole to another; neither is there univocal decoding, not because ambiguity reigns, but due to the restoration of the "ambivalence of meaning and in demolishing in the same stroke the agency of the code." (183) Graffiti answers these criteria – it responds on the spot and "smashes the code." One doesn't decipher it like a commercial message. It "volatilizes" the code and exists beyond the communicative grid. (184) The semiocracy knows no modesty in the city and expands everywhere at all times. Graffiti remains one of the few means of symbolic expression and

elsewhere Baudrillard cites early 1970s New York grafitti featuring pseudonyms and numbers KOOLKILLER 29 – SNAKE I – SUPERBEE SPIX COLA 139 – that meant nothing and were dnotatively and connotatively reticent to the extreme, but functioned as a “symbolic matriculation number … derail[ing] the common system of designation.” ((Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, London: Sage, 1993, p. 78.)) These *empty signifiers* erupt in the midst of *full signs* and dissolve the latter “on contact.” Obviously, Baudrillard retains a certain semiotic language in his description of this phenomenon and does not write in the mode of the symbolic.
Writing *of* rather than *as* the symbolic Baudrillard remarks how grafitti tags travel the city on the sides of buses and subways and are “given, exchanged, transmitted and relayed in a collective anonymity.” ((Ibid., p. 79.)) The sudden appearance of graffiti, Baudrillard adds, the “savage mobility” of the spray painting and postering can hijack the wall upon which it appears and annihilate it – think, for a moment, of bathroom graffiti scratched into the wall of stalls as opposed to the corporate inserts of bathroom advertising that found its way onto university campuses and restaurant restrooms in the 1990s. Now certain establishments even provide blackboards! This is merely an attempt to curb and contain expression. Official urban renewal projects attempt to tame graffiti by turning it into murals, which may then be recuperated as art, or multicultural policy or youth development. Baudrillard’s sense of graffiti is not tied to beauty or any other such functions. Ultimately, it is an antidote to communication in its circulation and exchange in the manner of a gift.