

## Chapter 8

# Utopia is Here: Revolutionary Communities in Baudrillard and Nancy

Anne O'Byrne

Both Jean Baudrillard and Jean-Luc Nancy are inheritors of a Marxist revolutionary tradition, and both have taken to task those contemporary political theories which remain too firmly bound to Cartesian understandings of subjectivity and autonomy and, indeed, Kantian understandings of intersubjectivity. Both have generated new accounts of the social but, where Baudrillard's recent work on representation and simulacra seems deeply radical it is, instead, quite entangled in a long-established metaphysical tradition and, in fact, it is his particular commitment to that tradition that generates the work's notorious nihilistic tendencies. In contrast, Nancy's work on presentation and symbol seems nostalgic, engaging a set of issues which, for Baudrillard, were matters for the earlier, surpassed age of symbolic exchange: the work seems more entrenched than ever in the tradition Baudrillard struggles to go beyond. Yet Nancy's return to the origin of *symbol* in the Greek *symbolon* yields an altogether more radical (in all senses of the word) account of the social, and one which does not proceed under the shadow of nihilism.

The subjectivist and intersubjectivist political philosophies against which both Baudrillard and Nancy argue will be represented here by Habermas' early piece, "Technology and Science as 'Ideology,'" but I have no wish to present Habermas as a straw man or indeed a thinker opposed to what I here call revolutionary thinking. Rather, I treat the work of Habermas, Baudrillard and Nancy as moments in a philosophical procession. All three share a concern with technology and culture, with the fate of classical Marxist theory in a world run according to a substantially different form of late capitalism, with the problem of language and also therefore with the matter of social practice, but I will concentrate here on the particular issue of their respective work in developing our understanding of subject, representation and object. It is not a question of a simply systematic development, which explains my preference for the term "philosophical procession" rather than "*progression*". For, though I do see Nancy's treatment of the symbol and social being as preferable to Baudrillard's work on the simulacrum and mass society, it is a step behind rather than beyond that work; in fact, the treatment has a great deal in common with Baudrillard's own early analysis of social being in *The Mirror of Production*.<sup>i</sup> By the same token, the problem in Marx's theory addressed in that work was also the problem for which Habermas sought a solution in his work of the same period, that is, the problem of reducing an analysis of society and the whole of human relations to the relation to the means of production alone. This problem is my point of departure.

## I Beyond Marx

Habermas began the work of overcoming this distinctively Marxist reduction in his 1968 essay “Technology and Science as ‘Ideology.’”<sup>ii</sup> What the reduction had done was place at the centre of Marxism the relation between labour and capital (or, at most, workers and capital) rather than the relations between humans. Missing, according to Habermas, was an account of communication, of language as the means by which we identify one another as subjects (Habermas, 72). To that extent his remains a fundamentally Cartesian analysis<sup>iii</sup>: one’s own subjectivity is taken for granted, and the interesting problem is figuring out how one can identify others as subjects rather than, as Descartes put it in the *Meditations*, automatons moving about in hats and coats.<sup>iv</sup> As Mark Poster has pointed out, doing this in the context of Marxism meant adding to the category “technical action” the category “symbolic interaction” which is to say, it meant adding to the designation “worker” the designation “social being.”<sup>v</sup> However, the difficulty came in simply adding this category (adapted from Weber) rather than restructuring the theory, which eventually had to be done by means of the ideal speech situation, complete with its ideal truth-telling, self-aware, comprehensible subject.

This is the Cartesian subject with a distinctive Kantian twist. In Descartes, the I was a personal pronoun, referring to Descartes himself. He conducted the *Meditations*, but the I he uses most importantly designates himself as an exemplar; any one of his readers could (and indeed each is invited to) do the same. The I in Kant rarely refers to the author’s person and when it does it is a matter of merely his person.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the I is significant as the signifier of the rational, transcendental, wholly impersonal I. Yet, though this may ring true for the first Critique, the picture is made far more complex in the *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>7</sup> Kant’s formulations vary, but using the language of Section 40 of the *Critique of Judgment*, “Taste as a Sort of Sensus Communis”, the rational I is construed as also the judging I, and as such must be arrived at through a social context. One judges fairly only by developing a practice of stepping out of one’s own subject position and occupying, imaginatively, the positions of (all possible) others, and so participating in an enlarged mentality. The good judge judges consistently, and judges for himself, but also takes into account the possible judgments of others. This is not so much a prescription for personal relations or for social practice as it is the invocation of a transcendental subject, a subject that is the condition for the possibility of social action. So, though Habermas is often—and I would say rightly—criticized for his subjectivism (Poster, 75), I would like to make the narrower point that he relies on Kant’s invocation of a transcendental *intersubject* as the condition for the possibility of social *interaction*. That is to say, he is to be criticized for his *intersubjectivism*.

Let me be explicit about the difference between these two. To take Habermas to task for his subjectivism is to point to the fact that his theory is based on an assumption of the fundamental position of the coherent, self-contained individual already capable of desiring, reasoning and acting. The fact that it is introduced as a regulative ideal is no counter-argument; such an ideal remains fundamental as the condition for the possibility of speech and interaction. As Baudrillard might put it, it is the problem of putting the subject into orbit, removing it from the world. The problem of others, then, is the problem of other minds and the spectre of solipsism stalks any ensuing theory. If

anything, others are utterly and irretrievably alien. On one level, this simply infects the issue of intersubjectivity; the initial image is still one of monadic individuals occupying an empty, undifferentiated space who must set out in search of fellow subjects with whom to establish intersubjective relations, and therefore to criticize on the grounds of intersubjectivism is simply to extend the critique on the grounds of subjectivism. Yet this is not how intersubjectivist theories claim to operate. Rather, the subject is understood as coming to be (in this case, as a judging subject) in the company of others; judgment could not happen without the existence of those others. Yet what does being with these others involve? It involves using our imaginations to occupy the positions of others, which is to say it involves assuming that others are simply foreign, their positions subject to colonization, their views of the world subject to domestication. What is more, the practice of judgment imposes such colonization on us as necessity.

## II A Baudrillardian critique

Baudrillard is a welcome critic of such social theories. While his work runs parallel to Habermas' in terms of a shift within and finally beyond Marxist theory to the matter of social relations as constituted by factors other than the relation to the means of production, their paths diverge at an early stage. While Habermas was taking as his starting point "the fundamental distinction between work and interaction" (quoted in Poster, 73), Baudrillard was working, in *The Mirror of Production*, to demonstrate this to be a false distinction generated by Marx's historical materialism. The problem with that understanding of the world is that all of history is seen reflected in the eponymous mirror of production, whereas, Baudrillard argues, the concept of production, or, more precisely and more importantly, the assumption that production is natural to us, is an artifact of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Only in capitalism does a distinction between work and interaction emerge but, since historical materialism insists that the latest stage of history provides the best way to understand all earlier stages, the distinction is taken as fundamental and used to explain not only the present but also the past and the projected future (*B-Mirror*, 86).

In response, Baudrillard suggests a re-reading of the past that seeks to retrieve an account of pre-capitalist societies that is not utterly determined by the categories of political economy. The category he applies, rather, is that of the symbol and symbolic exchange. Marxist anthropology, he claims, is based on the assumption that in human societies, the struggle for survival comes first and only then, once subsistence is secured, do the members of these societies begin to exist socially (*B-Mirror*, 78). At this first stage they all engage in producing use value, and if exchange happens, it is the exchange of a surplus (stage 1). This supposed, natural situation is later destroyed by the advent of industry and the alienation of all labour in the production of exchange value (stage 2), which finally distorts all of society and puts even love, virtue and knowledge into the realm of exchange (stage 3). Yet this leads anthropologists to ask such questions as: "Why did primitive societies not produce a surplus, even when they were capable of doing so?" According to Baudrillard, such questions have no answer because they make no sense; the model is quite wrong.

More precisely, the model is inverted. Rather than subsistence making social life, and eventually exchange, possible, exchange is what comes first. Baudrillard writes:

Primitive “society” does not exist as an instance apart from symbolic exchange...Symbolic circulation is primordial...For the primitives, eating, drinking, and living are first of all acts that are exchanged: if they are not exchanged, they do not occur (*B-Mirror*, 78-79).

Such societies are based on reciprocity and this is why everything is set in terms of exchange value; what cannot be exchanged accumulates, which is to say forms a break in the circulation, a break where power could be instituted. Such scarcity as was established in primitive societies was the scarcity necessary to keep this circulation in motion and, by the same token, the production of value was excluded. After all, if value could simply be produced there would be a constant threat of accumulation: instead, Baudrillard writes, “exchange itself is based on non-production, eventual destruction and a process of continuous *unlimited reciprocity between persons*” (*B-Mirror*, 79).

Understanding the past in these terms rather than according to the linear patterns of political economy also requires a different approach to the future, an approach Baudrillard specifies as utopian. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century socialists which Marx dismissed as utopian still operated in terms of the symbolic order and sought a new symbolic configuration of life and all social relations (*B-Mirror*, 154). Marxism, in contrast, confines its revolutionary efforts to one realm of social life, and pictures the future simply in terms of natural, fulfilled labour. What’s more, given the laws of historical materialism, this fulfillment cannot happen now, depending as it does on the inevitable ripening of capitalism’s contradictions in advance of the final revolution. What this means for any given present is that while utopian socialists can devote themselves to immediate revolution, Marxism must give itself over to deferral, sacrificing the present to an “always renewed future” (*B-Mirror*, 161). But this is utopian in the worst possible sense; it is a project of totalization. Utopia, properly speaking, has nothing to do with totalization and alienation: rather, Baudrillard writes, “it regards every man and every society as already totally there, at each social moment, in its symbolic exigency” (*B-Mirror*, 165). It is not that we must neglect the future in favour of the present reality of our own desires. What it entails, rather, is that “the content of liberated man is, at bottom, of less importance than the abolition of the separation of the present and the future” (*B-Mirror*, 164).

Marxism, and indeed liberalism, manifest their adherence to the subject by presenting us with the image of liberated man either in terms of the pre-Industrial Age craftsman producing use value, or of the free, fulfilled worker/social being of the communist or liberal utopia. That is to say, whether in liberalism or Marxism, and whether we cast our eyes to the past or to the future, commitment to thinking in terms of the subject leaves us only with images. We have only utopian images to look ahead to, and only museum items to look back upon. This is important, although impossible: it means that we must not only abolish the separation between present and future, but also between present and past. When, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, western culture began to subject itself to critique, it opted to do so as a universal culture, with all earlier and different cultures subjected to its schema. More aptly put, “all other cultures [were] entered into its museum as vestiges of its own image” (*B-Mirror*, 88).

Baudrillard presents all of this in *The Mirror of Production*. Only later, in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, *Seduction*, and, eventually, *Simulacra and Simulations*, does he extend the reign of images through the present with dramatic, even fatal, results

for any Baudrillardian political theory. This extension is firmly in place when he announces, in ‘The Precession of Simulacra’ in *Simulacra and Simulation*, that “[w]e are all Tasaday.” The Tasaday were a primitive tribe “discovered” in the Phillipines by anthropologists and then “undiscovered,” returned to their isolated habitat and their old way of life. Yet that way of life was now no longer properly theirs, since it could only be sustained by energetic dissimulation, a dissimulation conducted in order to preserve not the Tasaday but anthropology and the body of knowledge or the institution that we know as western science. The Tasaday became images of themselves, and we are Tasaday because we exist as images determined by that same institution. The simulacrum takes precedence but, more significantly, the simulacrum’s distinguishing feature is that it takes precedence over nothing. It entails no reality, it is not engaged in any strategy of representation or misrepresentation. Where there once was a symbolic order, a world where signs had meaning, there is now simulation and simulacra disguising the truth: that there is no reality, that there is no truth, that there is no relation other than to the sign.

In other words, like the mummy of Ramses II, exhibited in a contemporary museum, we have all been museumified. That is to say, interiority has collapsed, that we are mere spectacles valuable only as technological products or reassuring—never dissenting, never challenging—vestiges of our culture’s image. (One wonders what meaning this “our” can now have.) In no sense can we make a contribution to, and still less a critique of, the world in which we find ourselves. We are all embalmed, but not in the sense in which the dead king was embalmed by the Egyptians, that is, as an essential element in a symbolic order. Instead, we are embalmed in the sense of what happens in the funeral industry today (at least in the United States) where the product is a corpse “more smiling, more authentic” than in life.<sup>8</sup> There is no secret meaning to the face amidst the silk-like lining of the coffin, and no question of interiority. (After all, the corpse’s eyes, the windows to the soul, are invariably closed; to leave them open, staring, would be too uncomfortable a reminder that there *is* nothing within.) We have each been emptied out, flattened into a surface, an image. Necessarily, fulfilling human relations have suffered the same fate: all we have are their images as presented in the visualizations and the so-called science of the self-help industry, complete with formulae, prescriptions and a determination that there be no secrets that cannot be made common knowledge in some little volume entitled *All You Ever Wanted to Know About Personal Relations* or, maybe, *The Idiot’s Guide to Fulfillment*.

From a Baudrillardian point of view, this state of affairs is merely facilitated by subjectivist critical theory. To be led by ideals of my fulfillment is to look forward to a totalized utopia and/or backward to an era of symbolic order and symbolic circulation on the assumption that both past and future are quite distinct from this present where all symbolic orders have been erased or emptied out and replaced by the mere play of signs. It is to maintain a commitment to the Cartesian/Kantian subject not only as an empirical phenomenon but also as the transcendental condition for the possibility of communication. It is to fail to take account of the radically different media of communication which now serve to hide from us the fact they are communicating nothing. It is, finally, a version of false consciousness, a simulacrum covering over the absence of meaning.

### III Critiquing Baudrillard

However, despite its striking similarities to Nancy's revolutionary thought (as I will show below) and the politically radical nature of at least the earlier work, Baudrillard's critique is itself susceptible to the claim that it too remains committed if not exactly to the Cartesian subject, then to other shades of Cartesianism. While Baudrillard takes up the possibilities offered by structural linguistics to examine images and their relations without explicit recourse to a subject (Poster, 76), Anthony King has argued that by privileging sign, mirror and image, Baudrillard nevertheless preserves a Cartesian prejudice in favour of sight and the eye. King writes:

The ocular sensation of external material objects is the starting point for both [Descartes' and Baudrillard's] theories. Significantly, the ocular starting-point facilitates the descent into the epistemological void because the concentration on the ocular immediately suggests that the central problem of human knowledge is one of representation.<sup>9</sup>

In Descartes, the problem becomes acute as soon as (any)one considers how one might overcome the untrustworthiness of one's eyes and set about verifying the representations they provide. For Baudrillard, it is a problem not for *anyone* in meditative mood, but for *everyone* in this historical era, the era which follows that moment some time in the 1970s when television became a dominant cultural force. It was the crucial moment because then "the relationship between object and representation is called into doubt" (King, 54). This is the advent of hyperreality and this is where the relation between object and representation is so thoroughly severed.

Yet it is hardly a radical critique if the model of objects being represented to subjects has already been shown to no longer hold. King goes on to elaborate his criticism in this way: even if Baudrillard is regarded as post-modern, he is not yet post-Heideggerian. Heidegger energetically rejected the Cartesian notion that language represents the objects in the world to the subject, construing it instead (to quote King) as "a texture which is itself constitutive of... reality and which is understood interpretatively" (King, 57). Despite his radical linguistic theory, it remains the case that, for Baudrillard, language supplements the ocular experience rather than being constitutive of that experience, as it must be for Heidegger. The claim is not, of course, a physiological or psychological claim that we talk before we see, but rather the claim that it is language that makes the world meaningful for us; it is language that makes our world a world at all, which is to say, our being thrown into the world is our being thrown into language. In this case, talk of subject-representation-object no longer makes sense and, in fact, the word *representation* must be dropped altogether. Instead it is a matter of presentation, since presentations require no determined relation to what they present, and, to again quote King, "they do not have a separate ontological existence from what they [re]present" (King, 58).

My final criticism of Baudrillard is of a different order; it is the common criticism that his is a nihilist account of the social world, and one that can produce only an arid fatalism. It is of no assistance when it comes to confronting the injustices of the world because, having been reduced to receivers of images, we can have no capacity for action. Mass passivity is our only option. Yet such a criticism is quite unjustified if we consider only *The Mirror of Production*. The work ends with a passage--"The Radicality of

Utopia”—replete with revolutionary fervour, the fervour of the 19<sup>th</sup> century socialists, the cursed poet, non-official art, the sexual revolution, the fervour of the unmediated revolutions of the Luddites, the Communards, the students of May 1968. In such utopian moments there is no question of representation, alienation or deferral. Rather, Baudrillard writes, “[t]he revolution does not speak indirectly; they [the revolutionaries] are the revolution” (*B-Mirror*, 166). It is only later, and certainly by the time of *Simulacra and Simulations*, that it becomes clear that such enthusiasm has evaporated, so that work is devoted instead to pursuing the implications of the claim--first hinted at in *The Mirror of Production*--that the sign now takes precedence. If it takes precedence over nothing, then revolutionary signs remain on the level of the sign and can only be absorbed by the system that they struggle to overthrow.

The root of this fatalism lies in Baudrillard’s failure to allow his insight into the immediacy of revolution and into the symbolic, non-representational character of revolutionary speech to temper the totalizing tendency of his analysis of the sign. As Nancy points out, such an analysis does not get to the bottom of the social; it must, rather, assume the social. As a result, while Baudrillard gives himself over to political nihilism, Nancy pursues a social ontology that works to hold open the space in which political action might still happen. In what follows I will examine Nancy’s recent work in this light, and under three headings: the radical treatment of the symbol, his concern with touch rather than (or in addition to) Baudrillard’s attention to sight, and his understanding of meaning in a world which, according to Baudrillard, has lost all meaning.

#### IV We are symbol

In a footnote to *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy draws our attention the origin of our word *symbol*:

[T]he Greek *sumbolon* was a piece of pottery broken in two pieces when a pair of friends or a guest and host parted; joining the two pieces together again would later be a sign of recognition.<sup>10</sup>

The Greek *sun*, he points out, is the equivalent of the Latin *cum* (and of the English *con*), which reminds us that symbolism is all about a relation. A Baudrillardian might agree, pointing out that the relation in question is the one between object and representation, or reality and image. Nancy disagrees. Neither the Habermasian theory of communication based on the supposition of a rational subject, nor the Baudrillardian theory of hyperreality, based on the supposition of a real (albeit now lost) presence go far enough. Neither supposition can found a theory of the social, because each already presupposes being social or social being. The *sum* of *sumbolon* refers to this; it refers not to the specific relation of reality and the image but to the relation between beings. Nancy writes:

[T]he “spectacle,” “communication,” the “commodity,” “technology” are no more than figures (albeit perverse figures)... of social reality—the *real* of social being (*l’etre-social*)—laid bare in, through and as the symbolicity which constitutes it (*ESP*, 79).

Nancy here makes the distinction between a concept of the real-as-such on the one hand, which, despite the sophisticated analysis of symbolic exchange in *The Mirror of*

*Production*, lurks behind the assumption of past, meaningful, lost symbolic orders which is essential to the argument of *Simulacra and Simulation*, and a concept of reality as social on the other, pointing out, in Heideggerian fashion, that social reality is always already symbolic. To paraphrase King paraphrasing Heidegger, symbols form the texture which is itself constitutive of social reality.

According to Nancy, the symbol *is* the relation. He writes:

[I]t is the job of the symbolic to create *symbole*, that is, link, connection, and to provide a figure for this linking or to make an *image* in this sense. The symbolic is the real of relation as it represents itself, because relation as such is, in fact, nothing other than its own representation... [T]he relation is the real of a representation, its effectiveness and its efficacy. (The paradigm is “I love you,” or perhaps more originally still, “I’m talking to you”) (*ESP*, 79).

The word *sumbolon* means “to put with”. The friend puts her shard of pottery with her friend’s shard; doing so symbolizes their relationship; it is not something distinct from their relationship; it *is* their relationship. Furthermore, bringing home the critique of the hyperrealists, it is not a question of this being a symbol *rather than* an image.

Symbolization does not require the banishment of the (mere)image; it only requires that the image/symbol be in play with connectedness and distance, in the space *between*. As he puts it:

The “symbolic” is not an aspect of social being: on the one hand, it is this being itself and, on the other, the symbolic does not take place without (re)presentation: it is (re)presentation to one another according to which they are with one another (*ESP*, 80).

Nancy executes an important shift away not from the ocular metaphor entirely but from the assumption of the singular seeing eye/I seeing an object which is understood as not itself seeing. It has already been pointed out that, when it comes to spectacle, the plurality of seers (in this case spectators) is vital. He then adds another element by attending to the experience of touch. In ‘Gaining Access to the Origin’ (in *Being Singular Plural*), the concept of touch gains an ontological significance, emerging as it does from a discussion of the concept of reaching the origin. (In French, *toucher à* is to reach, while *toucher* is to touch.)

To reach [*toucher à*] the origin is not to miss it; it is to be properly exposed to it. Since it is not something other..., the origin cannot be missed nor can it be appropriated (penetrated, absorbed). It does not obey this logic. It is the plural singularity of the being of [any] being. We reach it [*nous y touchons*] to the extent that we reach [or touch] each other, and where we reach [or touch] other beings. We touch each other insofar as we exist. Touching each other is what makes us ‘us,’ and there is no other secret to be discovered or hidden behind this touch itself, behind the “with” of co-existence (*ESP*, 32).

Yet this would seem to introduce another problem. If the emphasis is shifted to or shared with touch, does this not return us to the matter of skin touching skin, or, if the set of beings regarded as relevant is appropriately increased, of surface touching surface? That is to say, does it not demand an understanding of the world and specifically the others who populate it in terms of accessible exteriors hiding inscrutable interiors? Does it not return us to the most troublesome aspect of modern subjectivity? Not in Nancy’s

hands. In much of his work of the past 15 years, he has been bringing about a gestalt shift in how being-with-one-another is understood. Rather than beginning with the subject and going on to build up an intersubjectivity by building relations between them, he studies these relations first, since it is these relations, the trajectories (touches, glances, movements) across a space that go to constitute the I at all. Interiority and exteriority are always in play, whether we mean the interiority and exteriority of the I or of the community, the we. For instance, in *The Experience of Freedom*, freedom is characterized as the “interior exteriority of the community.”<sup>11</sup> This is how he proposes the social be understood.

This play of interiority and exteriority can also be understood in terms of the discussion of the symbol. In an earlier piece, ‘Art, a Fragment’ in *The Sense of the World*, he engages again the original meaning of *symbola* as:

the potsherds of recognition, fragments of pottery broken in the promise of assistance and hospitality. The fragment carries the promise that its fractal line will not disappear into a gathered whole but, rather, will rediscover itself elsewhere, lip against lip of the other piece.<sup>12</sup>

The surfaces where the pottery was broken are the external surfaces of the pieces, but are internal to the reassembled pot. Claiming its surfaces as exterior, the shard remains a fragment, a part of something lost; yet its incorporation into the reassembled pot, the transformation of those surfaces into internal surfaces is not enough to stop it continuing to be a fragment.

The final challenge Nancy makes to Baudrillard comes in the form of his reassessment of sense or meaning. At issue, once again, is the implication of Baudrillard’s critique that there is or was a real presence which is now lost (in time) and/or dissimulated, replaced by empty images which disguise the loss (*ESP*, 78). It is in introducing his analysis in this area that he comes closest to Baudrillard’s assessment of the state of the world here and now; he is painfully aware of the contemporary tendency to nonsense. Like Baudrillard, he sees all “messages” as being exhausted or evacuated; unlike Baudrillard, however, he does not see this as necessitating nihilism. Rather, with the emptying out of all messages comes the reemergence of the demand of sense, a demand “that is nothing other than existence insofar as it *has* no sense. And this demand alone is already sense, with all of its force of insurrection (*SW*, 9).” The problem, he suggests, is in understanding the world as something that ought to *have* meaning, in perpetuating an understanding of the world as either (mere) signifier or (hidden/nonexistent) signified. More specifically, it is in the implication that signifying and being signified are static states involving a single, static relationship. What he proposes instead is a “*praxis* of signification” (*SW*, 79), a thought that relies not on what is the case at a particular time along a single axis, but the movement that happens in and through and around an open space.

In the language of his renewed fundamental ontology, it is a fresh understanding of sense that emphasizes the aspect of *being-toward*. The French *sens* operates in two ways; one would allow translation as *sense* or *meaning*, while the other has to do with *way* or *direction*. Dwelling on the former encourages thought along the lines of “A means B,” or “A stands for B;” shifting to the latter renders sense as *being-in-the-direction-of*, being in un- or under-determined relation to. It is a *way* of being. What’s more, this

understanding must usurp any understanding of signification as primary or primordial (or even necessary). Instead, Nancy writes, reminding ourselves of this other sense of *sense*:

would recall us to sense as relation *to* or as *being-towards-something*, this something evidently always being “something *other*” or “something *else*.” Thus, “*being-toward-the-world*,” if it takes place (and it does take place), is caught up in sense *well before* all signification. It makes, demands or proposes sense this side of or beyond all signification (*SW*, 7).

Meanwhile, *world* shares that same structure. It too (and, as with his comments on Heidegger’s *touch*, this is Nancy’s broadening and deepening of a Heideggerian insight) is *being-towards*, relation, address, presentation *to*. Indeed, he adds, *world* is structured as *sense* and *sense* is structured as *world*. “‘The sense of the world’ is a tautological expression” (*SW*, 8).

Yet what does this entail? The answer to this question determines whether or not we are condemned to nihilism. Nancy writes:

The whole question is whether this tautology reduces to the repetition of the same lack of signification in two distinct signifiers (which would amount to nihilism) or whether, instead, the tautology states the difference of the same, through which sense would make world and world would make sense, but quite otherwise than by the returning of signification (*SW*, 8).

His own conviction is quite clear. It *is* the case that the world can no longer *have* meaning. Talk of *having* meaning made sense only so long as the world was understood as being in relation to some other, whether that other was its creator, as in Christianity, or another world, as in Plato. Now, with the collapse of essence and existence, there is no longer essentially—which is to say existentially—anything else. “Thus, the world *no longer has* a sense, but it *is* sense” (*SW*, 8).

A Baudrillardian might remain unconvinced. What, after all, is the difference between *having* meaning and *being* meaning if it all remains beyond us, hidden from us? Perhaps the world *is* meaning, but if so, it is just a question of translating Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacrum into Heidegger’s terms where it becomes the claim that the spectacular society has left us as poor in world as Heidegger’s lizard or his stone.<sup>v</sup> Nancy has, as reply, the reassurance quoted above: “*Being-towards-the-world*” *does* indeed take place.” Yet that, in itself, is hardly enough and, in *Being Singular Plural*, he provides what’s missing, making explicit the place of this claim in his ontology. It is an insight reminiscent of Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*<sup>13</sup>: “Nothing, and nobody, can be born without being born to and with others” (*ESP*, 83). That is to say, what is primordial is not so much *Dasein* as *Mitsein*, being-with. More to the point, it is a matter of being-with other beings in the most general sense: nails, cats, stones, gods, plants, humans. After all, when we say “we,” what is to stand in the way of our thereby referring to all beings? What warrants our referring to anything less? We only have a world because we are bound up in the we, and meaning or sense is nothing other than the name for our being-with-one-another. As Nancy writes: “We no longer ‘have’ meaning because we ourselves are meaning, wholly, without reserve, infinitely, with no other meaning than ‘us’” (*ESP*, 19). There is no meaning without the “with”, there is no meaning that is not shared and meaning circulates constantly between us. Perhaps we have all been museumified, like Ramses, in that our exteriors no longer clothe inaccessible interiors; perhaps we are all spectacles for one another. Yet we are not *mere* spectacles but

participants in the society of the spectacle; we are exteriors that are also interiors; we are active receivers of imagery as well as images.<sup>14</sup>

## V Conclusion

Baudrillard's analysis of contemporary spectacular society cannot but deliver us over to nihilism, because, for all the radicalness of his earlier work, he remains bound by an old metaphysics of subjectivity that determines the functioning of representation, signification, vision and meaning. Nancy's work in ontology manages to be more radical and to avoid nihilism and political fatalism as its necessary conclusion. Indeed, it avoids conclusion. It projects no utopia and never attempts to prescribe. What it does point to, at least, is the fact that figuring out what is to be done (and the reference to Lenin is deliberate) is a task, and it must be undertaken without ever losing sight of what has gone before. As he writes in *The Sense of the World*:

[It is] neither a problem to be solved nor a solution, it is simply a matter of accompanying a clarification that already precedes us in our obscurity, much younger and much older than that obscurity: how our world makes sense. (This implies neither that the clarification is simply luminous nor that it is simply successful or happy. But—some *Enlightenment*, yes, why not? As long as it is not preromantic but truly postromantic) (*SW*, 8).

---

<sup>i</sup> *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975).

<sup>ii</sup> Poster, "Critical Theory and Technoculture: Habermas and Baudrillard" in *Baudrillard: a Critical Reader* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994). Habermas, "Technology and Science as 'Ideology'", trans. Jeremy Schapiro in *Towards a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971). Hereafter CTT.

<sup>iii</sup> The Descartes I have in mind here is Descartes as read (or misread) by Heidegger, the Descartes who conceives himself as discovering the subject, readymade, in an empty world. The question then comes to be the question of how (or if) this subject can fill and populate the space in which it finds itself, how it can make its world.

<sup>iv</sup> Of course, Descartes did not himself reach a satisfying resolution to his problem.

<sup>v</sup> Martin Heidegger. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. Translated by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.