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Resistance to Nihilism: Benjamin, Baudrillard, and Duchamp

Abstract: If we reread carefully some main texts written long ago by Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard, we may find a scene of problematization not only of contemporary art but also of the contemporary state of the world, where nihilism in its different shapes should be met with resistance, both political and artistic. It really has become the world of simulacra, as Baudrillard would say, or the art in the age of technical reproducibility, as Benjamin suggested. To add to this problematic, the ambiguous status of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, produced, or, rather re-produced during the First World War and revived in art criticism and art practice after the Second – an *oeuvre* which is deemed as “the most influential work of art in the 20th century” – we are faced with the enigma of questioning our own response as a start of resistance to the historical nihilism we live today. This text of ours does not seek to give all, nor even some answers to this enormous problematic, but rather to sketch a framework of the ways we could look at the questions we need to ask ourselves.

Keywords: Benjamin; Baudrillard; Duchamp; technical reproducibility; simulacra; nihilism; creation.

In our view, at least for this occasion, the most important resistance we should engage in and maintain is the resistance towards nihilism. Nowadays nihilism has many forms – it acts as an annihilation of values, but also as a reversal of values, where the former high values of culture or life are now being displaced and replaced by later lower values - but its root is the same as before and lies in what Nietzsche had defined as metaphysics of the “two lives”: one as a higher sphere of ideal or true life and another as an only apparent or deceptive, although it is only real life for us. Nihilism operates from both above in this hierarchy, and in the name of the higher sphere it devaluates the real empirical life, or from the below, when it installs the devaluated view on the top of the value scale; both fields become a flat line, the values become equally (un)worthy, indifferent, the same – i.e. worthless. (“We have done away with the true world: what world is left over? The apparent one, maybe?”, asks Nietzsche; “But no! Along with the true world, we have also done away with the apparent!”¹)

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (Cambridge: Hackett, 1977), 24.

In order to think about the resistance to nihilism, we are going to read again two post-Marxist theoreticians whose works are still relevant: one is the French thinker Jean Baudrillard, the other is the German critic Walter Benjamin. As for Baudrillard, he has been somewhat neglected in the recent past, although the shadow of this negligence has been dragging since the beginning of Baudrillard's theoretical career: he was (de)valued among philosophers as a non-philosopher or as the one who does not "properly" belong to philosophy since he was a sociologist and cultural critic more interested in "transitory", "idiosyncratic", even "trivial" phenomena like media, Parisian Beaubourg, or even Las Vegas; he has been deemed as not-so-original since his main concepts like simulacra or communication were rather borrowed from others, and his style of writing has been seen as more of a rhetorical, hyperbolic, extravagant "firework" rather than following the established line of conceptual analysis and logical argument. We don't intend to defend Baudrillard from these observations – philosophically speaking he is too experimental for traditional, departmentally or academically oriented disciplines of philosophy, he indeed pursued the rhetorical devices often unusual in theory, and certainly he often borrowed his crucial terminology from others, rather "unfaithful" in his changed meanings of those terms – but we see in all this an advantage that we can use now for our purposes in further thinking about arts and the world of media. "Forget Baudrillard" – like his *Forget Foucault (Oublier Foucault, 1977)* – is an ironic call to read or reread Baudrillard, like he called to reread Foucault, and not to neglect him either partially nor totally.

The situation of Walter Benjamin is a different one. He was popular in the 1980s and 90s, often for ideological reasons among the left, or leftist social critics and their theories. With the transition of the political and social left towards cultural criticism, feminism and ecological thinking – which could be both leftwing and right – Benjamin's references to the "dialectical materialism" and Marxian discourse, in general, began to feel obsolete. His "messianism" – oriented towards the proletarian revolution as well as theology – was also an obstacle; even Jacques Derrida struggles in his readings² of Benjamin's thesis about the necessity of historical violence transcendently approved and has to use as a remedy the "messianism" with "messianic without messianism" (*une messianicité sans messianisme*) – and many of the readings of his texts have simplified in their interpretations the richness of his multiple meanings. In short, Benjamin has been read more ideologically than theoretically.

To begin with Benjamin, let us pay some attention to his important essay from 1935, "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction". This is the usual translation of the title into English. In German, however, there is a slight but important nuance: "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit".³ A *Reproduzierbarkeit* is not quite equal to "reproduction", since it refers to the possibility of reproduction, and in that not as a mechanical copying only external to the work of

² Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gill Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 228–98.

³ Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminationen – Ausgewählte Schriften*, Bd. I, Hrsg. S. Unseld (Frankfurt am M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), 136–69.

art – or anything else for that matter – but before that to the internal, inner possibility of something to be reproduced. Now, this “possibility” is also not just something that might befall an object in the future, that can be done to it externally and under the pressure of some set of circumstances, but is a loaded term in philosophical history that goes back to the old Greek thinking, to Aristotle in the first place, of the difference between *dynamis* and *energeia*, where *dynamis* is certainly “possibility” but also “power”, or even “might”: it is the power of a phenomenon to be realized, to become real according to its *telos*, and to pass from a possible to an *ergon*, a work. Aristotle’s distinction was later, in medieval, scholastic Latin taken as a pair *virtualitas* and *actualitas*, or as *in virtu* and *in actu*, and as such, it used to play a very important role in Christian theology: a man is only *in virtu* a God’s image and he or she has to do certain things – to behave as servant of God, to pray, go to his church, to practice *miser cordia* etc. – in order to fulfill his or her destiny and become God’s creature *in actu*. With Spinoza *dynamis*, *virtualitas* or essential possibility of a subject – to bypass Descartes and his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) – gave rise to his category of *possest*, borrowed from Nicholas of Cusa, a renaissance theologian and thinker – where *possest*, an invented term in late Latin, is a coinage of *posse*, be able or have power, and *-est*, the third person singular of *esse*, to be. A *possest* is, shortly, for Spinoza the power of a thing to be, not only a possibility to be but to be according to its inner power of *posse* becoming *esse*. Later Kant and Hegel added their understandings of possibility as a critical limit of ratio as *Vernunft* (Kant) or as a dialectical movement of intellect as *Geist* (in Hegel).

All these concepts are more or less known to Benjamin, and they put an aura – or more than one aura – around his uses of the term. If artwork has its *Reproduzierbarkeit*, it has it as its internal power, and in Benjamin’s dialectics the external power of some technical means activates this internal power into a mixture or a juncture of powers *in seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. The reproduced work is not a simple copy, it is produced again, re-produced. It is no more an original since it is re-produced, and it is a product that refers to its avowed original, its memory and its past, but also is oriented towards present and future: once re-produced it could be re-produced anew. The essential *Reproduzierbarkeit* within the work operates in such a way that it has opened a new, different horizon for a work. Work has lost its “aura” of past “authenticity”, it is not “authentic” in the old sense of “original”, since the new “origin” of work now lies in its *Reproduzierbarkeit*. Work has lost its “aura”, but it has produced another kind of “aura” as a new horizon for itself and – in the case of artwork – for art in general. The power of the *Reproduzierbarkeit* is its Spinozian *possest*: it is not theological *in virtu* that becomes *in actu*, not ontotheological *dynamis* that fulfills its *telos* in *energeia*, and the new “aura” as a horizon of art lies now in the *Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerkes*, the power to reproduce an artwork, which has not only aesthetic but also political consequences since this power is also based on technical apparatuses of the world.

Two remarks are necessary here. Philosophical conclusions drawn from Benjamin’s insight were worked out by Gilles Deleuze in one of the appendices to his *Logic of Sense*. Even without mentioning Benjamin, Deleuze speculates about the classical distinction between concepts and values of the original and its copies. Borrowing

from Lucretius and reading anew Plato's *Sophist*, Deleuze insists on the category of *simulacrum*. "The simulacrum is not a degraded copy", writes Deleuze, underlying: "It harbors a positive power which denies the *original and the copy, the model and the reproduction*".⁴ The copy is still a copy, as well as the original is still an original, but the metaphysical distinction, which has been invested into the tradition of art and its aesthetics (or, more precisely, into aesthetics and its understanding of art), does not hold anymore, because of the epochal change of technical, physical conditions.

If Baudrillard borrowed this idea from Deleuze, he took it into his thought experiment and developed even further: with the loss of "aura" of metaphysical distinction between the original and the copy, within the new horizons of simulacra, there are only simulacra. Even the world of "simulations" – which still maintains the old distinction – is now turned into the world of simulacra, and the old notion of "reality" becomes now a "hyper-reality".⁵ Power and the resistance to power changed places: earlier, there was a resistance to copies for the sake of originals, now the hyper-reality has the power to resist the old distinction and to engulf reality into its simulacra world. Should we resist to this new situation, and in the name of what? If we do so in the name of old "reality", we could be easily labeled as "reactionaries"; and if we embrace the new "hyper-reality", we give up our resistance and support the new form of power. Even more: without resistance, we risk becoming not only powerless but go over to the side of the new power of simulacra in such a way that we become nihilists since a nihilism is to be left without any resistance to power. Yet, in a turn that could be understood both as a Nietzschean and a Hegelian move – something that Deleuze would not approve. Baudrillard opens a chance not for nihilism but for creation.⁶

The art itself, we can say, was already there. Marcel Duchamp's famous work – *Fountain* from 1917 – was shown, so we are told, at the New York exhibition, or rather, it was not shown since it was "rejected". It has become a mystery whether all that actually took place there and at that moment, since what we have is a kind of report, published in an art magazine controlled by Duchamp, so it also well might be his own myth making. Whatever the case was, the original *Fountain* was thrown away or destroyed.⁷ What we have now, since the rediscovery of *Fountain*, apart from texts, are only "copies", in several of the most renowned museums in the world, all signed, or re-signed, by Duchamp, and therefore in the status of "originals". Since the 1917 "original" is lost, new "originals" – or "copies" – are made anew, i.e. re-produced. The artwork – as such, it is classified in the museums and art criticism – which was physically destroyed and only existed as a memory, is both lost and found, and is the simulacrum, even the simulacra, of itself.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *La logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1968), 214. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), 262.

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra et Simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), 12. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Paul Fosset et al (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 21.

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Oublier Foucault* (Paris: Galilée, 1977). Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, trans. N. Dufresne (New York: Semiotext(e), 2007).

⁷ See William Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp – Fountain* (Houston: Fine Art Press, 1989).

It could well be a singular case of Duchamp's genius, if it was not the "model" for many other works in 20th century visual art, in particular in so-called conceptual art. In the 2004 questionnaire to several hundred British experts, *Fountain* was proclaimed to be "the most influential work of art in the 20th century". And rightly so, because the majority of at least conceptual works in that century – and this continues well into the 21st – could well be in this or other way called "post-Duchampian" artworks. Again, *Fountain* is not a model here, in its literal sense, but a Duchamp's example for his basic, fundamental question that he put both to himself and the world in his notebooks from 1913: *Peut-on fair des oeuvres qui ne soient pas d'art?* "Is it possible to make the works which would be not of art?" The answer, if there is any, was searched for in his poetics of so-called ready-made object, the artifacts which were already produced but could be re-produced, without much intervention of its material side, as works – works at the same time of art, and not of art. Among the ready-made works, *Fountain* is perhaps the most exemplary or the most famous. It is a "pure" ready-made object, where artist's intervention is limited to turning object upside down and the (invented, to some extent) signature "R. Mutt 1917".

Both Duchamp's question and his answers are ambiguous. The question asks the possibility to "make", to produce, something which would not be of art, and as such it is trivial, even meaningless – since so many objects are produced every day which are not classified as works of art in the aesthetic sense. But French word *oeuvres* is loaded with aesthetic sense, in its connotations, and *des oeuvres* which would be not of art are therefore almost impossible. What would make them possible is a break or a rupture, a severance between *des oeuvres* and art, or, if one wished, discontinuation between what one has considered to be *des oeuvres d'art* and some new, unheard of, radically different *des oeuvres qui ne soient pas d'art*, a new and radically new beginning in art which negates the entire previous tradition, its past and its ways of art production. This ambiguity is inherent to the question and its strength comes from this possibility which is also an impossibility, a kind of (disjunctive) synthesis of a yes and a no.

Historically *Fountain* is a Dadaist gesture, and as such, it is ironic, and more than that – a nihilist answer to the nihilism of the First World War. Can we resist this historical nihilism by somehow re-producing it – and in what sense or aspect of "it" – in an artistic way? Could a re-production be an opposite, or just different, of production which has been turned into destruction? Are such re-production and destructive production opposites, and how? Or are they not so much opposite as they are different, wherein the strength of destruction – of nihilism – is used and turned, perhaps displaced, into or onto a re-productive power, when power undergoes such a change, that is the power of resistance to the power of destruction? Duchamp's *Fountain* seems to exist in the field of repetition of such questioning, in the realm of repetitions of difference(s). It may well be a ready-made urinal to piss on traditional art production and nihilism of its contemporary age, but it is also a fountain, a spring of resistance and the source of new power for art.

All this has more or less been already extensively discussed in the history of contemporary art since Duchamp. What has not been discussed, at least not extensively, deals with creative power, or power of creativity in art after Duchamp. In conceptual

art, taken in a broad or loose sense, creativity and creation are more important than artistic results themselves. We may well argue almost till eternity whether many – or any – post-Duchampian conceptual artworks really belong to art. If we deny them such qualification, we may use the whole and powerful tradition of classical, traditional art, and mobilize the strong aesthetic, historical or theoretical arguments from the tradition. If we take the opposite stance, we praise as art something which is both art and not-art, namely something that from the beginning – and that beginning lies in Duchamp's question rather than in *Fountain*, which exemplifies it – is artistically ambiguous. For the artistic or non-artistic values of such contemporary *oeuvres* live on the very questioning, and for everybody, not only for bookish people, where is and what is the line that divides art and not-art, where is the limit between *des oeuvres* and *des oeuvres qui ne soient pas d'art*, between production and re-production, original and copy, model and its reproduction, which are exactly the questions put to theory both by Benjamin and Baudrillard. It is also a question of the relation between creativity and destruction, nihilism and resistance to nihilism.

Could Benjamin and Baudrillard help us here? If yes, then how? Benjamin used a kind of Hegelian dialectical “solution” by saying that the new, conceptual, post-Duchampian creativity “overcomes” – *aufhebt* or *hebt auf* – nihilistic past. But such an answer would be too easy, almost mechanical, it would re-produce, and not produce in the sense of re-production, Hegel's *Aufhebung* “logic”. The result of such way of thinking, and it is not absent in some Benjamin's essays, is, for example, his well-known thesis that Fascism artistically overtook politics, and the proletarian or communist art of resistance to Fascism should politicize art. “*Fiat ars – pereat mundus* fascism says”, writes Benjamin in the final paragraph of the “Epilogue” of his essay on the technical reproducibility. “Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics that Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.”⁸

Not only historical “communism” has shown otherwise – or the same as Fascism, by also “rendering aesthetic” its politics – but Benjamin's response is deficient in other ways. It is known that Baudrillard was extremely critical towards contemporary art, especially the visual one. To his eyes, it is inflated production of trivia, full of superficial tricks and gestures of no importance. The art of the 20th century lacks the search for originality, and in that Baudrillard follows Benjamin and his “loss of aura”. The response to the former aestheticization of politics is no more politicization of art, since everything has been now aesthetized and politicized to banality. We are in the power grid of repetitive simulations, of overall transparency that hides nothing, or, in Baudrillard's hyperbolas, that exhibits *nothing* as its own surface. All values circulate and refer one to another so that they are no more effective, which is, in his view, the same as they do not exist anymore. Contemporary art – and Baudrillard specifically

⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,” *Illuminationen – Ausgewählte Schriften*, 168–9.

mentions Duchamp and Dadaism – is a nihilistic art.

In his final chapter of *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard returns to the question of nihilism. He refers to Benjamin (and Adorno), and now he sees nihilism of the contemporary age as different: the symbolic exchange, the overall re-production in signs of what was deemed as the production of material things, replacement of material commodities with immaterial, intangible symbolic objects - which are simulacra – has become ubiquitous and powerful to such extent that it is everywhere and transparent to all. It is no longer necessary to critically demask or debunk its hidden base – nothing is hidden anymore – nor dialectically search for resistance that could “overcome” hyper-real and therefore illusory world we live in, since contemporary nihilism, in Baudrillard’s eyes, hides nothing, produces nothing, but is being re-produced *ad infinitum*. We are trapped in it, and even our nostalgia for the old world of originals and copies is not of help to us. The nihilistic world, moreover, responds with indifference to our efforts to resist it.⁹

It well may be so in many aspects. We could read Baudrillard’s texts on art in two ways, and both are connected, although in different perspectives that shed light on our question on nihilism. On one hand, his perspective on nihilism in art and in history is useful to analyze the nihilism of avant-garde art and afterword, especially since Duchamp’s question from 1913. If that question is double edged – since it is nihilistic towards earlier art and its history, but leaves a possibility of another path for practicing arts – so is Baudrillard’s answer: he chooses to label himself a “nihilist” precisely in order to come closer to nihilism in question. On the other hand, his radical critique of contemporary art is a challenge to confront him by refining our own criteria for contemporary art practices.¹⁰ If our situation is such that the contemporary artwork does not belong to already established normative taste – like the traditional artworks had to conform to such taste – but it should build the criteria anew for its own sake (as Jean-Francois Lyotard suggested in his books on our contemporary “postmodern situation”,¹¹ and by his own inclination to “brute enjoyment” of artworks, without any preceding aesthetics or norms of taste, Baudrillard seems to tacitly subscribe to this position), and is therefore again nihilistic to all earlier tradition, even to its own times, it demands us to confront nihilism by inventing new and positive criteria and produce a critical stance that the artworks ask to be met with. Baudrillard might be dismissing contemporary art too easily, but we could use his lessons precisely in order to not do so and to sharpen our positive critical attention instead.

Therefore, we have taken both Benjamin’s and Baudrillard’s “answers” in order not to look for clear or definitive solutions, even in theory; we looked at them as a line of thinking that could help us to continue to search for different answers. Even for different kinds of questions. For example, is the world today so nihilistic as Baudrillard – ideologically a radical Marxist – sees it? Have simulacra and their symbolic

⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra et Simulation*, 12. Baudrillard, 107.

¹⁰ See Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, trans. A. Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), and especially Silvere Lotringer’s “Introduction: The Piracy of Art,” in the same book.

¹¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

systems of exchange, their use of communication and media (in the broader sense of “mediation” of the world), covered all of the world, so that there is no more space for resistance? Are simulacra nihilistic or so nihilistic that we cannot think of their – as Deleuze said – “positive power”?

Furthermore: should resistance be only radical, total, and not even possible as partial, here-now urgency of act or of thought? Is the only response to present nihilistic practices of ideological or political action that radicalizes us (Baudrillard, as on the verge of despair, even saw himself as a kind of “terrorist”, which is just the theoretical, bookish hyperbole of a Parisian intellectual), or the resistance to nihilism leads us towards a kind of creativity of which one possibility is seen in Duchamp’s *oeuvres* and many followers in Duchamp’s steps. Does this creativity, which also asks about the limits of power of arts and non-arts, make a difference? Benjamin and Baudrillard, if we both follow and confront them, help us to continue this line of questioning.

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