

AnyBody's Simulacra: A Theoretical Approach to (Post-Gender) Identity

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Abstract:

The [...] paper pursues a meta-theoretical focus as it traces how Georges Bataille's and Julia Kristeva's theories incorporate an increasingly less material or corporeal definition of the post-gendered subject and the signifying structures underlying it. [...] Kristeva's and Bataille's theories can be read as taking the (dissolution of) the subject beyond a framework of the real; and thus they call for a hyperreal contextualization, in which identity must be conceived of as (different levels of) Baudrillardian simulation.

1 Contemporary culture testifies to the fact that the "destabilized subject" has for some time been established as a predominant paradigm whose disconcerting and threatening aspects are often represented in different genres and forms of contemporary art. In this paper, rather than considering concrete forms of representations, which can be understood as external phenomena or symptoms of a certain *Zeitgeist*, I will focus on the theoretical assessment of the postmodern subject which is at the core (and is the cause) of these representations. Thus my paper will discuss and connect three theories which conceive of the subject (and its physical/natural qualities) as an unstable and ambivalent borderline phenomenon always on the verge of dissolution and not-being. These theories, accordingly, lend themselves to a reading of the postmodern subject as bursting the dualistic confines of not only the notions of subject and object but also of reality and hyperreality.

2 The following paper pursues a meta-theoretical focus as it traces how Georges Bataille's and Julia Kristeva's theories incorporate an increasingly less material or corporeal definition of the post-gendered subject and the signifying structures underlying it. Their concepts are to some extent anachronistic, since - although they were devised as early as 1957 and 1980, respectively, - they clearly surpass the socio-political or mimetic scope of contemporaneous interests in and expectations of theories of gender identity. I will argue that their theories instead represent or imply a timelessness which allows them to still contribute to contemporary critical debates on subjectivity. Kristeva's and Bataille's theories can be read as taking the (dissolution of) the subject beyond a framework of the real, and thus they call for a hyperreal contextualization, in which identity must be conceived of as (different levels of) simulation. Baudrillard's paradigm of simulation, whose principles suggest a deconstruction of both (gender) identity and the notion of representation/signification, will serve as a structural and theoretical framework in order to trace the diminishing materiality found in Kristeva's, and even more so, Bataille's theory.

3 Located in the field of poststructuralist theories of (gendered) identity, Kristeva's

(abject, jouissance) and Bataille's concepts (continuity of being, blindspot) conceive of identity as at its most interesting when on the verge of annihilation, as the following quotes from Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982) [1980] and Colin MacCabe's introduction to the 1982 edition of Bataille's *Eroticism* [1957] show:

These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit - cadere, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled. (Kristeva 3-4)

[Bataille] is concerned to place eroticism at the very centre of life but to do so by stressing its relationship to death as the moment at which our individual existence breaches the confines of the body to join the undifferentiated continuity of existence. It is our relation to both dead and living bodies which differentiates us from animals, who neither bury their dead nor feel any shame in their sexual activity. (MacCabe x)

4 However, as I will argue, and as the quotes above indicate, their assessment of identity differs when considering the aspect of "destabilization:" whereas Kristeva insists on the subject always being in contact with the symbolic order or modality, and thus stresses the redemptive aspect of referentiality and representation,¹ Bataille seems to temporarily dismiss the compensating power of the symbolic and the rational and rather celebrates the loss of control through the total dissolution of the subject as found, for example, in the continuity of being. Hence I will argue that their seemingly similar assessment of identity differs in terms of degree of "instability," ambivalence, obscurity, and borderline-ness. Toril Moi (1986) sums up Kristeva's approach to identity as outlined in "Revolution in Poetic Language" (1974) as follows: "Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both" (93). Whereas Kristeva is obviously aware of the risk entailed in the destabilization of the subject, Bataille's theory even seems to call for the subject's dissolution, considering it as sine qua non condition of human existence: "Violence alone, blind violence, can burst the barriers of the rational world and lead us into continuity" (Bataille, *L'Erotisme* 54 qtd. in Richman 81).

¹ The ambivalence of Kristeva's concept of the abject has often been neglected or ignored by critics: "When commentators [as, for example, Naomi Schor, who equates 'the abject' with Simone de Beauvoir's concepts of 'Otherness/negativity'] refer to the abject in passing they tend nevertheless to simplify it as the other or that which has been (successfully) expelled" (Still 222). Menninghaus argues that a simplified assessment of the abject entails a contradiction, since the abject, according to Kristeva does not have a (clear) object, however, it is given one in the approaches that reduce her theory to political or moral purposes (see 554).

5 In order to specify these differences, I will introduce Baudrillard's paradigm of simulation. His three-stage model will serve as the basis of a classification of Kristeva's and Bataille's assessment of the unaestheticized subject on the verge of annihilation. On the basis of Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum as a "copy without an original," I will argue that the assumptions of subject identity as well as the aspects of signification entailed in the theories of Kristeva and Bataille² can be correlated with different orders of Baudrillard's simulation.³ Thus, I will show in my paper how Kristeva's concepts of the abject and jouissance, in that they reflect a reluctance to giving up the contact to the symbolic order, can be related to the second order of simulation. Accordingly, Kristeva's concept still relies on (discursive) positions of gender. Bataille's concepts of moment of being and blindspot, since they do not share Kristeva's reluctance and even call for the subject's referentless dissolution and annihilation, relate to what Baudrillard refers to as third-order simulation. His concepts, I argue, totally abandon any reference to the very concept of identity and, accordingly, gender. On the basis of this classification, it will be discussed how the three orders of his model correspond to different concepts of gender identity and how both critics - by representing different orders in the theory of simulation - take similar yet different approaches to (gendered) identity. It is yet important to keep in mind that tracing a hyperreal approach to gender identity has nothing to do with any kind of mimetic or "realist" assessment of identity: "The concept of self-identity in our culture has been turned into a simulacrum, and is therefore irrelevant to real life" (Rider 2003). In the following, I will briefly sketch the relevant ideas of Baudrillard's model, i. e., clarify the theoretical premises of the principles of signification underlying his assessment of identity in each order of simulacra. I will then relate the central aspects of Kristeva's and Bataille's theories to it, both of which entail an approach to the postmodern subject itself and to the notion of signification that is linked to it (for more detailed explanation see footnote 2).

Baudrillard: Representation versus Simulation

6 Although first published in 1976, and 1981, respectively, both *Symbolic Exchange and*

² Both Kristeva's and Bataille's theories incorporate a concept of identity as well as one of the underlying principles of signification: in the case of Kristeva, it is the abject and jouissance, in the case of Bataille the moment of being and the blindspot. Bataille's concept of blindspot, as I read it, describes the underlying energy of a point of excess (moment of being) which defies or suspends the rules of signification (see Schneider 148). Kristeva's concept of jouissance can likewise be regarded as describing the underlying signifying structure of the (abject) subject, which is anchored in the pre-oedipal stage or semiotic modality and provides the subject with energy (see Kristeva 9).

³ Critics who refer to Baudrillard's theory of simulation/simulacra often focus on the concept in general rather than on the differences between and implications of the single orders of simulation.

Death and Simulacra and Simulation,⁴ which are Baudrillard's most thorough analyses of the principle of simulation, provide a still up to date account of the workings of the postmodern subject and society. The concept of simulation is opposed to that of representation inasmuch as representation is based on "the principle of the equivalence of the sign and the real," whereas simulation, as Baudrillard states, is derived from "the utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6). Simulation thus defies reference to any sort of reliable reality: "It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 1). In other words, the models precede the actual events, or the map the territories, as Baudrillard shows in *Simulacra and Simulation*. Simulation is basically an attempt at locating the subject with regard to the real and - along with that - at describing the increasingly complex workings and movements of signs heading for a total abolishing of the real (see Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 81).⁵ Taking the symbolic order, a state preceding the principles or orders of simulation where the workings of signs are totally in keeping with and leaving intact our notion of reality (see Horrocks, Jevtic 103-104), as a point of departure, Baudrillard distinguishes three different orders, each of which includes the preceding one(s) (see Baudrillard, *Exchange* 57).

7 The symbolic order still obeys the rules of reality, in fact, as Horrocks and Jevtic argue, "reality [is] not an issue" (104), since (gender) identities are still sustained within a signifying system where "signs are dominated by unbreakable and reciprocal symbolical order" (104). A symbolic order thus understood could, for example, describe the workings of essentialist models represented by the patriarchal conflation of gender and sex, as, for example, typical of nineteenth-century cultural discourses on gender where the prevailing stereotypical images of women and men assigned positive characteristics to the males and vice versa. Gender identity can therefore be described in terms of an unobscured signifier-signified relationship where (physical) signifiers relate to and designate monovalent positions of (cultural) signifieds. In contrast to that, the first order of simulacra denotes a subject(ivity) characterized by "signs [that] are emancipated from duty" (Horrocks, Jevtic 105). This order, where signs "dissimulate something" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6) does - strictly speaking - not yet belong to the realm of simulation, since dissimulation can be compared to pretending, to the imitation of a real, a principle which runs counter to questioning and destroying a real (see

⁴ In the following referred to as *Exchange* and *Simulacra*.

⁵ Just as the notions of identity and meaning are subject to an ever increasing dissolution, the specific aspect of gender, which is included therein, is also heading for an abolishing of the real when progressing along the orders of simulation.

Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 3). The signs or images, as Baudrillard calls them, "move from reflecting a profound reality to masking or perverting a profound reality" (Horrocks, Jevtic 106). Thus, although the signs mask a reality and therefore go a step further than in the symbolic order, they still refer to and exist on the basis of an assumed reality - even if an inverted one: "[The signs] dream of the symbolic order but can only feign or falsify it" (Horrocks, Jevtic 105). One could say that at this order reality is acknowledged through its repulsion: "The first-order simulacrum never abolishes the difference: it presupposes the dispute always in evidence between the simulacrum and the real" (Baudrillard, *Exchange* 54); the difference is never questioned, it is only concealed. In contrast to that, "simulation [that is, as I would say, second and third-order simulation] threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary'" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 3). In keeping with this, Baudrillard establishes "the counterfeit" as the dominant paradigm of identity of this first order, which works according to the principles of signification outlined above. Counterfeiting, as Baudrillard argues, does not happen through "changing the nature of an 'original,'" but rather through its extension, thus by means of "completely altering a material whose clarity is completely dependent upon a restriction" (Baudrillard, *Exchange* 51). The counterfeit is based on an ever pervading principle of falsity (see Horrocks, Jevtic 105), generating (and imitating) identity as a form of make-believe that is always referring back to the reality of the symbolic order: "The modern sign dreams of its predecessor, and would dearly love to rediscover an *obligation* in its reference to the real" (Baudrillard, *Exchange* 51). This order reflects, for example, as I would suggest, the mechanisms of radical feminist gender theories from the seventies, which try to deconstruct patriarchal and misogynist attributions to the sexes. Although they call for a separation of sex and gender, i.e. the signifier and the signified, they still extend and sustain the conflation through the inversion of the qualities attributed to the sexes.

8 The second order of simulacra is, one could say, the stage where "real" simulation begins, or which, at least, bears traces of simulation. Instead of signs that "dissimulate something," this stage is marked by "signs that dissimulate that there is nothing" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6). At this stage of beginning simulation, the image or the sign, according to Baudrillard, "masks the absence of a profound reality" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6) as simulation means "to feign to have what one doesn't have" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 3); the principles of signification at work can best be explained when looking at the dominant paradigm of identity of this stage, which is that of "production and the series" instead of imitation. In an ever increasing infinite series of production, the sign does not, like the

counterfeit, refer back to a real/an original, but "[...] indifferently to other signs in the series," regardless of the notion of origin or real (Horrocks, Jevtic 107).⁶ In this order, where the dissolution of the real begins, signifier-signified relationships are not just taken at face value (symbolic order) or simply inverted (first order of simulacra), but derive meaning (if one can say so at all), from "[referring] to serial differentiation, not to reality" (Horrocks, Jevtic 107).

9 With regard to theories of gender identity, this is the order where Kristeva's theory of the abject (identity) and the concept of jouissance (signification) could be located. Although her argument is partly based on clear gendered positions (like the maternal and the paternal and the notion of jouissance), her theory at the same time defies them, allowing for a less material/physical assessment. This seemingly contradictory nature of her theory can be explained by reading these gender positions, as Inge Suchsland suggests, as discursive positions within a signifying system, or, as I will argue, as the beginning of (second-order) simulation. The very concepts of the mother and the father and the underlying concept of jouissance as understood by Kristeva thus testify to the fact that there is no resemblance whatsoever between the signifier and the signified, and that referentiality and the generation of identity here is based on signs that do not refer (back) to a real anymore, but on signs dissimulating "that there is nothing" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6).

10 In contrast to the preceding orders, the third order of simulation totally discards any reference to reality in favour of a simulated hyperreality. Former principles and laws of referentiality here are totally taken over by simulacra, generating a universal simulation; reality and its reliable referents have disappeared (see Blask 10-11). Simulations/simulacra do not designate or refer to anything, but merely interact with other simulations/simulacra (see Blask, 23), which turns them into a quasi intra-referential system of signification, or better, simulation. Whereas, as Baudrillard states, the sign/image of the second order only "masks the absence of a profound reality," the image/sign of the third order "has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (*Simulacra* 6). This being the case, the simulacrum clearly has subversive potential as a form of counter-discourse, as Baudrillard outlines in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Not only does third-order simulation testify to the arbitrariness between signifier and signified (as described by de Saussure), but it also witnesses the dissolution of this arbitrariness, of the *difference between* signifier and signified (see Blask 30) and thus defies any form of meaningful interpretation other than of an intra-referential nature. As mentioned above, in this order the maps (or, as Blask calls them,

⁶ This idea is clearly indebted to both Derrida's concept of *différance* as well as to the de Saussurean concept of arbitrariness between signifier and signified.

"models that endlessly revolve within and around themselves [endlos in sich kreisende Modelle]" 31; my translation) in a mis-en-abyme like fashion precede and govern the events.

11 As far as the paradigm of identity is concerned, this - according to the principles at work at this order where simulation has become the all encompassing and pervading notion - is also based on pure simulation and hyperreality. Since the hyperreal is "more real than the real" (Horrocks, Jevtic 109), the form of (gender) "identity" derived from it is "the clone, android or replicant": something that is "more human than human" (Horrocks, Jevtic 110).⁷ This model, which precedes the facts (or "reality"), not only defies the different forms of gender conception outlined with regard to the previous stages - those which work on the basis of signifier-signified conflation as well as those conceiving of gendered identity as merely discursive positions within a signifying system (as suggested, for example, by Kristeva). It goes a step further than the second order of simulation, where Kristeva's discursive approach is located and discards any reference to any reality (even a discursive one) in favour of a system of intra-referential signification. This hyperreal approach to locating the subject with regard to representation calls for a likewise "hyperreal" assessment of (gender) identity like, for example the one provided by Georges Bataille.

12 Bataille's theory - as I will argue - surpasses Kristeva's concept, since his conception of (gender) identity as outlined, for example, in *Eroticism* (1957) could be read not only as being based on discursive positions partly referring back to a real, but as conceiving of gender (identity) itself as a simulacrum, a model, only affiliation to which has any meaning (see Baudrillard, *Exchange* 56). The third order of simulation is thus an appropriate framework for Bataille's two basic concepts discussed here: the blindspot, which relates to representation, and the continuity of being, which refers to identity; the latter provides a model where - in contrast to Kristeva - the subject (and along with it gendered identity) is unsexed and dissolved ad infinitum and where "our individual existence breaches the confines of the body to join the undifferentiated continuity of existence" (MacCabe x). The blindspot as the point where "reason founders" (MacCabe x) accordingly willingly defies any form of reliable representation.

13 In the following, I will first outline and elaborate how Kristeva's concept of identity - the abject - and its underlying concept of signification - jouissance - relate to Baudrillard's

⁷ From the point of view of simulation, which does not refer back to the real, the category of gender must be conceived of as one which has never existed because gender, especially since it describes a cultural construct, is a concept clearly located within a real(istic) or mimetic framework. Accordingly, the "clone, android or replicant," which are "more human than human" are not only not gendered, they are even less than that since they cannot be aware of a category of gender as a priori; they themselves can be regarded as the "map that precedes the territory" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 1).

second-order simulation. Then I will show how Bataille's concept of identity as represented by the continuity of being and the underlying assumptions about signification⁸ (blindspot) refer to the third order of simulation, that is, simulation proper. The following analysis starts where simulation begins - which is at the second order, because only then is the reference to the real abolished.

Kristeva and Baudrillard

14 Kristeva's two concepts, as I suggest, represent a stage on the way to "real" simulation; they work according to similar principles as Baudrillard's second order of simulation. In her theory of the abject as outlined in *Powers of Horror* (1982) and her concept of jouissance as described in "Revolution in Poetic Language" (1974), she leaves behind essentialist approaches to gender identity which relate - as previously outlined - to Baudrillard's symbolic order and the first order of simulation. Instead, she suggests a contradictory assessment of identity, negotiating (gendered) identity in a rather ambivalent fashion by conceiving of it as discursive positions which only partly (if at all) refer back to the real and the symbolic order.

15 The abject and abjection denote an in-between state that the subject is permanently exposed to and also a process the subject has to undergo constantly: something which takes me to "the border of my condition as a living being" (Kristeva 3). By means of these concepts Kristeva describes the contradictory nature of identity permanently struggling against not-being. As the abject is highly contradictory in nature, it is impossible (and also unnecessary) to pin it down: Kristeva refers to it as "[a] 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing" (2). On the one hand, the subject must dispose of the abject since it threatens the subject, on the other hand the subject cannot do so without eventually causing its own annihilation because ultimate abjection means death (see Kristeva 3). Kristeva traces abjection back to the state of *primal repression*, where the "not-yet-subject" separates from the archaic mother (for fear of the phallus of the father) in order to generate an independent subject identity (see Suchsland 124). Accordingly, the abject always contains the archaic contents of this pre-objectal relationship, "in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (Kristeva 10). According to Kristeva, the subject is and will therefore always be a fragile structure, which (often vainly) tries to exclude these contents of the unconscious.

16 This ties in with the notion of jouissance, which, as mentioned before, can be regarded as the underlying signifying structure of the (abject) subject: "It follows that jouissance alone

⁸ For further information on the close connection between identity and language compare also Jacques Lacan's idea of the unconscious being structured like a language.

causes the abject to exist as such" (Kristeva 9). Contradictory like the abject, jouissance too provides the subject with energy and at the same time fosters its destabilization. Inasmuch as identity is concerned, the theory of the abject takes into consideration the annihilation of the subject, yet also opts for sustaining it, safeguarding it against what threatens its boundaries. This being the case, I would like to argue that Kristeva's contradictory concept of identity is based on the principle of serial production as outlined by Baudrillard. Trying to sustain its boundaries, the subject oscillates between the undefined and ever changing discursive realms of the mother (jouissance/semiotic) and the father (symbolic order), which are never the same each time the subject revisits them. The ambivalences inherent in the concept of the abject - or jouissance - all testify to the fact that this borderline nature of identity does not generate a clearly defined material subject since there is no object the subject can set itself off against in order to safeguard its boundaries:

[T]here is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject. It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that "I" does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a jouissance in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant [...].

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it - on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. (Kristeva 9)

17 Since the abject does not have an object, the subject thus exposed must rely on "[referring] to serial differentiation, not to reality" (Horrocks, Jevtic 107). One could say, the sign exerting power over the subject in this phase "masks the *absence* of a profound reality" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6). The signs of the mother/father and those of the subject/object are permanently evading secured positions, concealing the fact that they are actually non-existent (at least not in a material or "real" way). Accordingly, the abject subject's quest for being is, one could say, granted only within a framework of serial production where the mother and the father as well as the subject/object are ever changing signifying positions hardly referring back to a real, but rather perpetually and inconsistently referring to each other. Thus the signs simulate a gendered haven, yet at the same time deny the subject a clearly accessible (gendered) real. The subject is permanently torn between being and annihilation, between the serial signs or discursive positions of the mother and the father, each of which vanishes or leads to destruction when the subject tries to secure its own subjectivity through objectifying them:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome.

Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. (Kristeva 2)

By doing so, the abject denies the subject access to a real, on the basis of which it could - in a dualistic manner - derive a clear concept of its own subjectivity in contrast to an other. It instead destabilizes our notion of self, dictating a realm of signification in which signs refer "[indifferently] to other signs in the series" (Horrocks, Jevtic 107), dissimulating an absence, in this case the absence of a reliable object. One could say that the object seduces the subject (see also Baudrillard's concept of "seduction," according to which it is the object that exerts power over the subject [see Blask on this]). In keeping with Baudrillard's theory, the object simulates its own object-ness in order to tempt the subject into annihilation, "[masking] the absence of a profound reality" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6) and "[feigning] to have what [it] doesn't have" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 3), or to put it differently, to be what it is not. On the other hand, however - and this is where Kristeva's theory lacks the radicality found in Bataille - she stresses that the subject needs to be in touch with the semiotic as well as the symbolic modality in order to sustain subject identity. This being the case, Kristeva's assessment clearly relates to Baudrillard's theoretical premises because according to the principles of the second order of simulation, the ties to reality are not totally severed yet - the state of simulation proper is not reached yet. In order to clarify this point, I shall now consider the aspect of referentiality underlying this concept of identity.

18 In keeping with the principles of the image or sign of second-order simulation, Kristeva's theories partly obscure the signifier-signified relationship in that the sign entails one signifier that refers to several possible signifieds, thus dissolving referentiality by means of "signs that dissimulate that there is nothing" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6). This is the case, for example, with the concept of jouissance, which - as outlined above - is closely related to and conditions the abject. Jouissance itself, one could say, is not located in mutually agreed upon realms of signification in that the signifier itself is a strange, sometimes non-verbal one (such as bodily rhythms, etc), yet the signifier is not distorted in itself (as it is the case with Bataille's theory of blindspot, where the signifier itself is already semantically obscured). Thus, Kristeva's concept of signification "starts to dissolve the real" (Blask 27; my translation) and opts for an obscuration of the real, without, however, totally discarding it. This becomes even clearer if one recalls her insistence on the subject always being in touch

with both, the semiotic and the symbolic realm.⁹ This latter aspect of her theory even bears traces, one could argue, of signification according to first order simulation as it opts for a reconciliation with and in the real through "homogeneity and universalization of language" (Blask 27; my translation).

9 But then again, the very concept of the abject counteracts this stability provided by the symbolic order, and "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2), thus permanently destabilizing the (gendered) subject. As my discussion has shown, Kristeva's theories of identity and signification basically meet the "requirements" of the second order of simulation. They go beyond essentialist conceptions of gender since her "subject in process/on trial" (Moi 89) most of the time defies the connection to the real (let alone biology or the material) because it is constituted on the basis of ongoing serial negotiations with the different discursive positions it relates to (as, for example, the mother and the father). The signifier-signified relationship is thus not to be taken at face value but is rather based on the principle of "serial differentiation," rendering (gender) identity a second-order simulacrum. In contrast to Bataille, one could argue that the struggles of the subject in process and the underlying mechanisms of signification take place within a three-dimensional hermetic system, staked out by the positions of father/mother, symbolic/semiotic, or simply subject/object as images or signs which refer to other archaic or pre-oedipal images and signs that are always already there, thus revealing a principle of "backwardness." Since only the signified is distorted one could argue that the signifying process reflects at least some connection to real representation. Meaning is still based on preceding processes of signification and as such takes place within a more or less hermetic three dimensional space which contains all possible signifieds radiating from a signifier. As far as Bataille's theory is concerned, I will try to show how his conceptions of continuity of being and blindspot go beyond Kristeva's positions in that they relate to the third order of simulation, suggesting a mis-en-abyme like structure expanding (gendered) identity and representation to a fourth (ad infinitum) dimension. This fourth dimension displays a radiating "forwardness"¹⁰ rather than a backwardness because the two concepts - in contrast to Kristeva's concept - cannot turn back to anything as they do not assume anything as real or a priori (as even the signifiers on which identity relies are distorted).

⁹ Kristeva's insistence on the indispensability of both modalities to some extent runs counter to other central assumptions and principles of her (later) theories and may be motivated by her sacrifice of radicality for the sake of applicability of her theory, especially in view of feminism's objectives and popular positions in the early 1970s.

¹⁰ See also Baudrillard's metaphor of the metastasis, which represents the contradictory aspects of acceleration as well as inertia resulting from an ever increasing chaotic growth. This culminates in the principle of ecstasy as a point of no return, which as such defies the laws of logic and referentiality (see Blask 69-70).

Bataille and Baudrillard

20 I will now, along the thematic and structural lines of the previous section, show how Bataille's concept of identity (continuity of being) in *Eroticism* as well as his (implied) concept of referentiality (blindspot) in his *Story of the Eye* (2001) [1967] are reflected in the workings and principles of Baudrillard's third-order simulation. Concepts of sex and gender are discarded by means of their total dissolution/simulation which is, according to Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, brought about by a collapse of the (difference between) signifier and signified.

21 Bataille's central interest lies in the intersection of death and eroticism and their implications for human existence: "What I want to emphasise is that death does not affect the continuity of existence, since in existence itself all separate existences originate; continuity of existence is independent of death and *is even proved by death*. [...] Erotic activity, by dissolving the separate beings that participate in it, reveals their fundamental continuity, like the waves of a stormy sea" (*Eroticism* 21-22).

22 According to Bataille's idea, "the aim of sexual pleasure is not the gaining but the losing of control. It is the moment of orgasm with the rending of the separate and unified self into a physicality that can no longer be located in one body [...]" (MacCabe xiii). In contrast to Kristeva's abject subject, Bataille's subject in continuity represents a desirable state as it does not depend on or seek the gaining back of control by means of securing its attachment to the real or a symbolic order. Bataille takes effort to stress the fascination rather than the danger inherent in the connection of death and continuity (see *Eroticism* 13). The dissolution or literal destruction of (physical) boundaries are even elevated to the status of the sacred. He outlines how in the feast taking place after rituals of sacrifice "[the] human flesh [...] is eaten then is held as sacred" (Bataille, *Eroticism* 71).

23 The sacred nature of the subject, whose physical and spiritual boundaries are thus breached after the subject's release from its enclosure "in its individual separateness" (90), is reminiscent of the hyperreal assessment of the real represented by third-order simulation. The subject's sacred nature in this elevated state precedes the facts, as it ties in with a hyperreal description of identity in which the subject cannot any longer be described according to mutually agreed upon mimetic models of identity anchored in the real. Instead, as the subject finds perpetual continuity beyond its own death, it is becoming a mere simulation defying the laws of the reality of life and death: "It is the common business of sacrifice to bring life and death into harmony, to give death the upsurge of life, life the momentousness and the vertigo of death opening on to the unknown. Here life is mingled with death, but simultaneously

death is a sign of life, a way into the infinite" (Bataille, *Eroticism* 91). In this state, as the subject is figuring in its own death, it can be described as a copy of a copy of a copy (without an original) and is accordingly elevated above the human, being "more human than human" (Horrocks, Jevtic 110). In other words, it bears traces of the paradigm outlined by Baudrillard: the replicant. As it blurs the boundaries between reality and hyperreality (see Horrocks, Jevtic 108) and "the true and the false" (Horrocks, Jevtic 110), as well as between subject/object, it goes beyond the assessment of identity suggested by Kristeva's discursive approach.

24 In keeping with the dominant paradigm of identity of the second-order simulation, (serial) production - Bataille describes his concept of (re)production as a mechanism that entails a discontinuity since it always refers back to the realm of the real and the symbolic. However, Bataille does not stop here; his concept implies and anticipates associations of what is to come when looking at third-order simulation, as the following quote - when read with regard to Baudrillard - shows: "Reproduction leads to the discontinuity of beings, but brings into play their continuity" (*Eroticism* 13). In conclusion, one can state that Bataille's approach to (un/gender[ed]) identity is less physical or material and thus less realistic than Kristeva's, even though he at times seems to suggest an essentialist description of gender which can, however, be deconstructed through his own concept of continuity.

25 There have been several debates about the question of whether or not Bataille's theory pertains to or is founded on sexist assumptions. As Judith Still states, while "[Dworkin] claims that Bataille has a *male* conception of sex," Susan Sontag, like several other critics, defends Bataille's theory against reproaches of sexism. Emphasizing the democratizing implications of Bataille's central theoretical concepts she argues in her article "The Pornographic Imagination," as Still writes, "that the relation [Bataille] highlights between sex and death is a *human* question" (Still 235).

26 I would suggest that reducing Bataille's theory to essentialism does not do justice to the visionary qualities also implied (eingedacht) in it. Bataille did make an important and early contribution to the philosophical exploration of identity; one could even say that from a poststructuralist point of view, he paved the way for theories like Baudrillard's, which conceive of (gender) identity not only as anti-essentialist but totally anti-real(ist) and simulacral.

27 In accordance with his seemingly essentialist understanding of the subject, he conceives of the female side as passive, while at the same time assigning an active role to the male (see Bataille, *Eroticism* 17). However, this essentialism is undone because of the mechanisms at work in the process of dissolution and erotic continuity, especially the latter of

which eventually functions as a form of democratizing principle:

Dissolution - this expression corresponds with *dissolute life*, the familiar phrase linked with erotic activity. In the process of dissolution, the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive. The passive, female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate entity. But for the male partner the dissolution of the passive partner means one thing only: it is paving the way for a fusion where both are mingled, attaining at length the same degree of dissolution. (17)

Thus, eroticism, I would argue, generates a (democratizing) gender-simulacrum, which is not based on any type of realistic concept, but which instead provides a model which is "irrelevant to real life" (Rider 2003) as it precedes and thus defies the principles of the 'real gender' or the 'gendered real': "The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators *as they are in their normal lives*" (Bataille, *Eroticism* 17, emphasis added).

28 Bataille further states that "the female partner in eroticism was seen as the victim, the male as the sacrificer, both during the consummation losing themselves in the continuity established by the first destructive act" (18). In order to comment on and sum up this point, I would like to suggest that gender difference is both deconstructed and has become obsolete as a concept because the "regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals" (18) is upset by eroticism. Identity in general (including gender) is a simulacrum, or a hyperreal model, as for example the replicant, which precedes formerly gendered positions, denying any contact whatsoever to the symbolic order. As with the (difference of) signifier and signified, not only the positions of subject and object are blurred, but the category of their difference is also effaced, suggesting a collapse of subject and object which generates a state of identity which knows no a priori since it has nothing to refer back to: "the subject is identified with the object losing his identity" (31). This state of identity could be referred to as 's/object,' in order to distinguish it from 'traditional' concepts of collapsed subject and object that do rely on and refer back to on something a priori, as for example to the previously visited and ever changing discursive positions (as represented, for example, by Kristeva's abject). Identity thus dissolved is again strongly associated with the aspects of signification or representation, and, as Bataille suggests, is located "outside the control of reason" (92). The simulacral concept of identity becomes even clearer when looking at signification, where Bataille's theory opts for an infinite reversal of the subject-object or the observer-observed positions, leading signification ad absurdum.

29 Bataille's concept of representation is closely related to his assessment of identity, and it also centres on the notions of sex and death as outlined above. Colin MacCabe states in his introduction to *Eroticism* that "[Bataille] wishes to stress [...] that this world creates as its

necessary counterpart the world of sex and death *where reason founders* [...] and the individual and discontinuous beings that we are taste the terrifying pleasures of the continuity of existence" (MacCabe x; emphasis added). Thus, the representation underlying the subject in continuity can be regarded as a form of self-contained system of representation, reminiscent of Baudrillard's third order of simulation, according to which the image or the sign "has no relation to any reality whatsoever" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6). The total detachment of Bataille's concept of signification from external or realist realms is mirrored in the concept of the blindspot, "the point at which the literal detail exceeds the symbol, exceeds the foundational or rationalized system given to contain it. [Bataille] found this excess in laughter, ecstasy, violence, death [...]. The blindspot is the crack through which duality overflows, exceeding its own distinctions - [...] not without contradiction, but inexorably *in* contradiction, or 'alteration'" (Schneider 148). This quote shows that Bataille goes a step further than Kristeva in her approach to signification, since she insists on a synthesis or reconciliation of the semiotic modality or *jouissance* and the symbolic order. In contrast to that, Bataille even opts for a total dissolution of the (gendered) subject, driving both identity and representation not towards a synthesis but towards "the alteration between symbolic and literal [which] refuses to resolve but dances in a kind of frenzied contradiction around a volatile crack - a 'blindspot'" (Schneider 148). Bataille's system of representation here very much reflects the principles of Baudrillard's third-order simulacrum. He not only - like Kristeva - assumes the relation of signifier and signified as arbitrary or free floating, but rather understands it as being based on a "slippery kind of [...] sensuous correspondence by which the symbolic 'alters' with that which it pretends to supersede: the literal - in much the same way as an eyeball alters with a saucer, testicles, the sun in *Story of the Eye*" (Schneider 148).

30 Inasmuch as the workings of signification, as implied in Bataille's theory and exemplified in *The Story of the Eye*, are concerned, signification is permanently obscured not only by means of metaphors that represent a distorted relationship between signifier and its (polyvalent) signifieds, but also by metaphors that are based on distorted signifiers. The signifier itself is, in terms of simulation, "a copy of a copy of a copy...", or a model preceding reality. There will be no resolution - not even a polyvalent one - between the signifier-signified, nor between the ever reduplicating signifiers themselves; rather, the signifier and signified collapse. Due to the semantic distortion of the signifier, as for example the "envaginated eyeball," the reader witnesses, as Schneider puts it, "the slippage in signification from one meaning to another [...] in which an eyeball becomes a saucer of milk becomes a

testicle becomes the sun becomes an eyeball again" (147).^{<fn>}See also Susan Sontag's analysis of *The Story of the Eye*: "The egg in the first chapter is simply the earliest version of the eyeball plucked from the Spaniard in the last" (Sontag 110-11).^{</fn>} To sum up this point, this total obscuration of meaning generates an intra-referential system of representation, permanently reproducing and altering meaning and along with that (gender) identity. The semantically distorted signifiers are without reference to the real and interact with other components of the system, that is, with other simulations. This simulated hyperreality provided by Bataille's theoretical concepts clearly goes beyond Kristeva's approach, dissolving not only the relation between signifier and signified, but also the *difference* between signifier and signified (see Blask 30).¹¹ This undoing of the difference between signifier and signified, which results in a collapsing of the two, surpasses the principles of signification underlying a conception of identity that relies on realist structures of signification, even discursive ones. The total loss of meaning and identity can be represented as a mis-en-abyme structure, in which identity (the infinite subject-object split and reconciliation described in the concept of continuity of the s/object) as well as signification (as represented by the blindspot) "has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6). This is clearly in contrast to Kristeva's concept, which I have described as a three dimensional space or hermetic system in which all discursive positions the subject can take - even though they are based on an infinite number of possible signifieds - are a priori and pre-inscribed. Bataille's theory instead requires an additional dimension which accounts for the system's infinite forwardness in keeping with the contradictory principles of perpetuity represented by the Möbius strip.¹²

31 Baudrillard's model of simulation provides an appropriate framework for the synchronic as well as diachronic classification of different concepts of (gender) identity. In focussing on the second and third order of simulation, this paper has shown how Kristeva's and Bataille's theories of identity and signification can be interpreted as representations of the postmodern subject/body as a fragile and increasingly simulated and less materialist notion. This culminates in the realm of the hyperreal (third order of simulation), which locates the (formerly gendered) subject with regard to a total collapse of signifier and signified and cuts the ties with any form of real or realism, witnessing instead a total dissolution of the physical and spiritual features of identity as well as the subject/object split suggested by the notion of

¹¹ This ties in with Roland Barthes' reading of Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, according to which "Bataille's slipping into and out of concrete particulars trips up the fixity of any meaning so that 'any term is never anything but the signifier of a neighboring term'" (Barthes, "La Metaphore de l'oeil" 195-96 qtd. in Schneider 147).

¹² Another structure that describes these principles is the hypercube, "[o]ne of the simplest four-dimensional structures [...]. It is the four-dimensional analogue of an ordinary cube" (Burbanks 1996).

eroticism in Bataille's theory: "As part of the destructuring process of the rational, Cartesian subject, [eroticism] can lead to a fusion that defies physical boundaries. The subject transcends itself not to rejoin a lost union of oneness with the universe, but to participate in an experience that pushes Being to the limit during orgasm, the 'petite mort' simulating death" (Richman 81). This concept of hyperreality, or hyper-materiality, as one might call it, in which there are no objective correlatives, and in which "[a]ll the referentials combine their discourses in a circular, Möbian compulsion" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 18), denotes an ever changing and self-contained system of not only signification but also visualization as another form of representation that brings forth the conception of the s/object. This s/object does not know of and refer to any kind of former separation of subject and object, as it represents "the map that precedes the territory" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 1), or the copy without an original, to use Baudrillard's words. As such it is subject to (s/object to) the contradictory principles of the Möbius strip: just like the surface(s) of the Möbius strip are always already there and have neither been clearly together nor distinctly separate, the position of the s/object does not derive from two distinct modalities or positions, either. Thus, the very category of the difference between subject and object has either become obsolete or is simply not part of third-order simulation as third-order simulation denies any idea or reference to the idea of a priori.

32 It would exceed the scope of this paper to trace the possible connection between, for example, Bataille's theory of visualization and Baudrillard's paradigm of (third-order) simulation. However, I suggest, the genre of contemporary film, e.g., testifies to the fact that - just as is the case with written media - the visual genres witness a similar dissolution and dematerialization of the subject-object positions. The relationship between observer and observed, as well as the visualizing (in analogy to the signifying) structures underlying it follow a similar mis-en-abyme pattern. It would thus be a worthwhile endeavour to locate the post...post...postmodern subject¹³ with regard to visual representation, tracing in how far the subject (or rather the s/object) is subject to subject to subject to... "a Baudrillardian hall of mirrors in which others mimick others mimicking others till the Different supposedly collapses with the Same" (Schneider 171).

¹³ In keeping with the mis-en-abyme character suggested by Baudrillard's paradigm of (third-order) simulation, one could even dispose of the referentiality entailed in the concept "**post**modern," revealing the very meaning of "post" as a simulacrum and void, since it runs counter to Baudrillard's principles as it assumes a signifying structure as well as a concrete concept as a priori (i.e. modern). Accordingly, the post^x-modern-subject discussed in this paper can best be described when conceiving of the prefix "post" as following the same mis-en-abyme like principle.

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