

From:
The System of Objects
by Jean Baudrillard
(first published as *Le système des objets*, 1968)
Translated by James Benedict
©Verso, London, 1996

B. THE NON-FUNCTIONAL SYSTEM, OR SUBJECTIVE DISCOURSE

II A Marginal System: Collecting

Littré's dictionary defines '*objet*' in one of its meanings as 'anything which is the cause or subject of a passion; figuratively — and *par excellence* — the loved object'.

Let us grant that our everyday objects are in fact objects of a passion — the passion for private property, emotional investment in which is every bit as intense as investment in the 'human' passions. Indeed, the everyday passion for private property is often stronger than all the others, and sometimes even reigns supreme, all other passions being absent. It is a measured, diffuse, regulating passion whose fundamental role in the vital equilibrium of the subject or the group — in the very decision to live — we tend not to gauge very well. Apart from the uses to which we put them at any particular moment, objects in this sense have another aspect which is intimately bound up with the subject: no longer simply material bodies offering a certain resistance, they become mental precincts over which I hold sway, they become things of which I am the meaning, they become my property and my passion.

The Object Abstracted from Its Function

If I use a refrigerator to refrigerate, it is a practical mediation: it is not an object but a refrigerator. And in that sense I do not possess it. A *utensil* is never possessed, because a utensil refers one to the world; what is possessed is always an object *abstracted from its function and thus brought into relationship with the subject*. In this context all owned objects partake of the same abstractness, and refer to one another only inasmuch as they refer solely to the subject. Such objects together make up the system through which the subject strives to construct a world, a private totality.

Every object thus has two functions — to be put to use and to be possessed. The first involves the field of the world's practical totalization by the subject, the second an abstract totalization of the subject undertaken by the subject himself outside the world. These two functions stand in inverse ratio to each other. At one extreme, the strictly practical object acquires a social status: this is the case with the machine. At the opposite extreme, the pure object, devoid

of any function or completely abstracted from its use, takes on a strictly subjective status: it becomes part of a collection. It ceases to be a carpet, a table, a compass or a knick-knack and becomes an object in the sense in which a collector will say 'a beautiful object' rather than specifying it, for example, as 'a beautiful statuette'. An object no longer specified by its function is defined by the subject, but in the passionate abstractness of possession all objects are equivalent. And just one object no longer suffices: the fulfilment of the project of possession always means a succession or even a complete series of objects. This is why owning absolutely any object is always so satisfying and so disappointing at the same time: a whole series lies behind any single object, and makes it into a source of anxiety. Things are not so different on the sexual plane: whereas the love relationship has as its aim a unique being, the need to *possess* the love object can be satisfied only by a succession of objects, by repetition, or, alternatively, by making the assumption that all possible objects are somehow present. Only a more or less complex organization of objects, each of which refers to all the others, can endow each with an abstractness such that the subject will be able to grasp it in that lived abstractness which is the experience of possession.

Collecting is precisely that kind of organization. Our ordinary environment is always ambiguous: functionality is forever collapsing into subjectivity, and possession is continually getting entangled with utility, as part of the ever-disappointed effort to achieve a total integration. Collecting, however, offers a model here: through collecting, the passionate pursuit of possession finds fulfilment and the everyday prose of objects is transformed into poetry, into a triumphant unconscious discourse.

The Object as Passion

'The taste for collection', says Maurice Rheims, 'is a kind of passionate game.'¹⁶ For children, collecting is a rudimentary way of mastering the outside world, of arranging, classifying and manipulating. The most active time for childhood collecting is apparently between the ages of seven and twelve, during the latency period between early childhood and puberty. The urge to collect tends to wane with the onset of puberty, only to re-emerge as soon as that stage has passed. In later life, it is men over forty who most frequently fall victim to this passion. In short, there is in all cases a manifest connection between collecting and sexuality, and this activity appears to provide a powerful compensation during critical stages of sexual development. This tendency clearly runs counter to active genital sexuality, although it is not simply a substitute for it. Rather, as compared with

¹⁶ *La vie étrange des objets* (Paris: Plon, 1959), p. 28. [Translator's note: There is an English translation by David Pryce-Jones: *Art on the Market* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1961). I have not used it here.]

genitality, it constitutes a regression to the anal stage, which is characterized by accumulation, orderliness, aggressive retention, and so on. The activity of collecting is not in any sense equivalent to a sexual practice, for it is not designed to procure instinctual satisfaction (as in fetishism, for example); it may nevertheless produce intense satisfaction as a reaction. The object here takes on the full significance of a loved object: 'Passion for the object leads to its being looked upon as a thing made by God. A collector of porcelain eggs is liable to believe that God never created a form more beautiful or more singular, and indeed that He devised this form solely for the greater delight of collectors.'¹⁷ Collectors are forever saying that they are 'crazy about' this or that object, and they all without exception — even where the perversion of fetishism plays no part — cloak their collection in an atmosphere of clandestineness and concealment, of secrecy and sequestration, which in every way suggests a feeling of guilt. It is this passionate involvement which lends a touch of the sublime to the regressive activity of collecting; it is also the basis of the view that anyone who does not collect something is 'nothing but a moron, a pathetic human wreck'.¹⁸

The collector's sublimity, then, derives not from the nature of the objects he collects (which will vary according to his age, profession and social milieu) but from his fanaticism. And this fanaticism is identical whether it characterizes a rich connoisseur of Persian miniatures or a collector of matchboxes. The distinction that may legitimately be drawn here, to the effect that the collector loves his objects on the basis of their membership in a series, whereas the connoisseur loves his on account of their varied and unique charm, is not a decisive one. In both cases gratification flows from the fact that possession depends, on the one hand, on the absolute singularity of each item, a singularity which puts that item on a par with an animate being — indeed, fundamentally on a par with the subject himself — and, on the other hand, on the possibility of a series, and hence of an infinite play of substitutions. Collecting is thus qualitative in its essence and quantitative in its practice. If the feeling of possession is based on a confusion of the senses (of hand and eye) and an intimacy with the privileged object, it is also based just as much on searching, ordering, playing and assembling. In short, there is something of the harem about collecting, for the whole attraction may be summed up as that of an intimate series (one term of which is at any given time the favourite) combined with a serial intimacy.

Man never comes so close to being the master of a secret seraglio as when he is surrounded by his objects. Human relationships, home of uniqueness and conflict, never permit any such fusion of absolute singularity with infinite seriality — which is why they are such a continual source of anxiety. By contrast, the sphere of objects, consisting of successive and homologous terms, reassures.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁸ M. Fauron, president of the cigar-band collectors' association, in *Liens* (review of the Club français du Livre), May 1964.

True, such reassurance is founded on an illusion, a trick, a process of abstraction and regression, but no matter. In the words of Maurice Rheims: 'For man, the object is a sort of insentient dog which accepts his blandishments and returns them after its own fashion, or rather which returns them like a mirror faithful not to real images but to images that are desired.'¹⁹

The Finest of Domestic Animals

Rheims's dog image is the right one, for pets are indeed an intermediate category between human beings and objects. The pathos-laden presence of a dog, a cat, a tortoise or a canary is a testimonial to a failure of the interhuman relationship and an attendant recourse to a narcissistic domestic universe where subjectivity finds fulfilment in the most quietistic way. Note, by the way, that these animals are not sexed (indeed, they are often neutered for their role as household pets); they are every bit as devoid of sex, even though they are alive, as objects are. This is the price to be paid if they are to provide emotional security: only their actual or symbolic castration makes it possible for them to serve as mitigators of their owners' castration anxiety. This is a part that all the objects that surround us also play to perfection. The object is in fact the finest of domestic animals — the only 'being' whose qualities exalt rather than limit my person. In the plural, objects are the only entities in existence that can genuinely coexist, because the differences between them do not set them against one another, as happens in the case of living beings: instead they all converge submissively upon me and accumulate with the greatest of ease in my consciousness. Nothing can be both 'personalized' and quantified so easily as objects. Moreover, this subjective quantifiability is not restricted: everything can be possessed, cathected or (in the activity of collecting) organized, classified and assigned a place. The object is thus in the strict sense of the word a mirror, for the images it reflects can only follow upon one another without ever contradicting one another. And indeed, as a mirror the object is perfect, precisely because it sends back not real images, but desired ones. In a word, it is a dog of which nothing remains but faithfulness. What is more, you can look at an object without it looking back at you. *That is why everything that cannot be invested in human relationships is invested in objects.* That is why regression of this kind is so easy, why people so readily practise this form of 'retreat'. But we must not allow ourselves to be taken in by this, nor by the vast literature that sentimentalizes inanimate objects. The 'retreat' involved here really is a regression, and the passion mobilized is a passion for flight. Objects undoubtedly serve in a regulatory capacity with regard to everyday life, dissipating many neuroses and providing an outlet for all kinds of tensions and for

¹⁹ Rheims, *La vie étrange des objets*, p. 50.

energies that are in mourning. This is what gives them their 'soul', what makes them 'ours' — but it is also what turns them into the decor of a tenacious mythology, the ideal decor for an equilibrium that is itself neurotic.

A Serial Game

Yet this mediation would seem to be a poor one. How can consciousness let itself be fooled in this way? Such is the cunning of subjectivity: an object that is possessed can never be a poor mediation. It is always absolutely singular. Not in reality, of course: the possession of a 'rare' or 'unique' object is obviously the ideal aim of its appropriation, but for one thing the proof that a given object is unique can never be supplied in a real world, and, for another, consciousness gets along just fine without proof. The particular value of the object, its exchange value, is a function of cultural and social determinants. Its absolute singularity, on the other hand, arises from the fact of being possessed by me — and this allows me, in turn, to recognize myself in the object as an absolutely singular being. This is a grandiose tautology, but one that gives the relationship to objects all its density — its absurd facility, and the illusory but intense gratification it supplies.²⁰ What is more, while this closed circuit may also govern human relationships (albeit less easily), the relationship with objects has one characteristic that can never be found in the intersubjective realm: no object ever opposes the extension of the process of narcissistic projection to an unlimited number of other objects; on the contrary, the object imposes that very tendency, thereby contributing to the creation of a total environment, to that totalization of images of the self that is the basis of the miracle of collecting. For what you really collect is always yourself.

This makes it easier to understand the structure of the system of possession: any collection comprises a succession of items, but the last in the set is the person of the collector. Reciprocally, the person of the collector is constituted as such only if it replaces each item in the collection in turn. An analogous structure on the sociological level is to be found in the system of model and series: both the series and the collection serve to institute possession of the object — that is, they facilitate the mutual integration of object and person.²¹

²⁰ It also creates disillusion, of course, itself bound up with the tautological character of the system.

²¹ The *series* is practically always a kind of game that makes it possible to select any one term and invest it with the privileged status of a *model*. A child is throwing bottle-tops: which one will go the farthest? It is no coincidence if the same one always comes out ahead: this is his favourite. The model he thus constructs, the hierarchy he sets up, is in fact himself — for he does not identify himself with one bottle-top but, rather, with the fact that one bottle-top always wins. And he is just as present in each of the other tops, unmarked terms in the antagonism between winner and losers: throwing the bottle-tops one by one is playing at constituting oneself as a series in order then to constitute oneself as a model. Here, in a nutshell, is the psychology of the collector; and a collector

From Quantity to Quality: The Unique Object

It may well be objected here that any exclusive passion for a single object on the part of an art lover suffices to demolish our hypothesis. It is quite clear, however, that the unique object is in fact simply the final term, the one which sums up all the others, that it is the supreme component of an entire paradigm (albeit a virtual, invisible or implicit one) — that it is, in short, the emblem of the series.

In the portraits in which he illustrates the passion of curiosity, La Bruyère puts the following words into the mouth of a collector of fine prints: ‘I suffer from a grave affliction which will surely oblige me to abandon all thought of prints till the end of my days: I have all of Callot except for one — and one which, to be frank, is not among his best works. Indeed, it is one of his worst, yet it would round out Callot for me. I have searched high and low for this print for twenty years, and I now despair of ever finding it.’ The equivalence experienced here between the whole series minus one and the final term missing from the series is conveyed with arithmetical certainty.²² The absent final term is a symbolic distillation of that series without which it would not exist; consequently it acquires a strange quality, a quality which is the quintessence of the whole quantitative calibration of the series. This term is the unique object, defined by its final position and hence creating the illusion that it embodies a particular goal or end. This is all well and good, but it shows us how it is quantity that impels towards quality, and how the value thus concentrated on this simple signifier is in fact indistinguishable from the value that infuses the whole chain of intermediate signifiers of the paradigm. This is what might be called the symbolism of the object, in the etymological sense (cf. Greek *sumballein*, to put together), in accordance with which a chain of signifiers may be summed up in just one of its terms. The object is the symbol not of some external agency or value but first and foremost of the whole series of objects of which it is the (final) term. (This in addition to symbolizing the person whose object it is.)

La Bruyère’s example illustrates another rule, too: that the object attains exceptional value only by virtue of its absence. This is not simply a matter of covetousness. *One cannot but wonder whether collections are in fact meant to be completed*, whether lack does not play an essential part here — a positive one, moreover, as the means whereby the subject reapprehends his own objectivity. If so, the *presence* of the final object of the collection would basically signify the death of the subject, whereas its absence would be what enables him merely to

who collects only privileged or ‘unique’ objects is simply making sure that he himself is the object that always wins.

²² Any term in the series may become the final term: any Callot can be the one to ‘round out Callot’.

rehearse his death (and so exorcize it) by having an object represent it. This lack is experienced as suffering, but it is also the breach that makes it possible to avoid completing the collection and thus definitively erasing reality. Let us therefore applaud La Bruyère's collector for never finding his last Callot, for if he had done so he would thereby have ceased to be the living and passionate man that he still was, after all. It might be added that madness begins once a collection is deemed complete and thus ceases to centre around its absent term.

This account of things is buttressed by another story told by Maurice Rheims. A bibliophile specializing in unique copies learns one day that a New York bookseller is offering a book that is identical to one of his prize possessions. He rushes to New York, acquires the book, summons a lawyer, has the offending second copy burnt before him and elicits an affidavit substantiating this act of destruction. Once he is back home, he inserts this legal document in his copy, now once again unique, and goes to bed happy. Should we conclude that in this case the *series* has been abolished? Not at all. It only seems so, because the collector's original copy was in fact invested with the value of all virtual copies, and by destroying the rival copy the book collector was merely reinstating the perfection of a compromised symbol. Whether denied, forgotten, destroyed, or merely virtual, the series is still present. The serial nature of the most mundane of everyday objects, as of the most transcendent of rarities, is what nourishes the relationship of ownership and the possibility of passionate play: without seriality no such play would be conceivable, hence no possession — and hence, too, properly speaking, no object. A truly unique, absolute object, an object such that it has no antecedents and is in no way dispersed in some series or other — such an object is unthinkable. It has no more existence than a pure sound. Just as harmonic series bring sounds up to their perceived quality, so paradigmatic series, whatever their degree of complexity, bring objects up to their symbolic quality — carrying them, in the same movement, into the sphere of the human relationship of mastery and play.

Objects and Habits: Wrist-Watches

Every object oscillates between a practical specificity, a function which is in a sense its manifest discourse, and absorption by a series or collection where it becomes one term in a latent, repetitive discourse — the most basic and tenacious of discourses. This discursive system of objects is analogous to the system of habits.²³

²³ Moreover, any object immediately becomes the foundation of a network of habits, the focus of a set of behavioural routines. Conversely, there is probably no habit that does not centre on an object. In everyday existence the two are inextricably bound up with each other.

Habits imply discontinuity and repetition — not continuity, as common usage suggests. By breaking up time, our ‘habitual’ patterns dispel the anxiety-provoking aspect of the temporal continuum and of the absolute singularity of events. Similarly, it is thanks to their discontinuous integration into series that we put objects at our sole disposition, that we own them. This is the discourse of subjectivity itself, and objects are a privileged register of that discourse. Between the world’s irreversible evolution and ourselves, objects interpose a discontinuous, classifiable, reversible screen which can be reconstituted at will, a segment of the world which belongs to us, responding to our hands and minds and delivering us from anxiety. Objects do not merely help us to master the world by virtue of their integration into instrumental series, they also help us, *by virtue of their integration into mental series*, to master time, rendering it discontinuous and classifying it, after the fashion of habits, and subjecting it to the same associational constraints as those which govern the arrangement of things in space.

There is no better illustration of this discontinuous and ‘habitual’ function than the wrist-watch.²⁴ The watch epitomizes the duality of the way we experience objects. On the one hand, it tells us the actual time; and chronometric precision is par excellence the dimension of practical constraints, of society as external to us, and of death. As well as subjecting us to an irreducible temporality, however, the watch as an object helps us to appropriate time: just as the automobile ‘eats up’ miles, so the watch-object eats up time.²⁵ By making time into a substance that can be divided up, it turns it into an object to be consumed. A perilous dimension of praxis is thus transformed into a domesticated quantity. Beyond just knowing the time, ‘possessing’ the time in and through an object that is one’s own, having the time continuously recorded before one’s eyes, has become a crutch, a necessary reassurance, for civilized man. The time is no longer in the home, no longer the clock’s beating heart, but its registration on the wrist continues to ensure the same organic satisfaction as the regular throbbing of an internal organ. Thanks to my watch, time presents itself simultaneously as the very dimension of my objectification and as a simple household necessity. As a matter of fact, any object might be used to demonstrate how even the dimension of objective constraint is incorporated by everyday experience; the watch, however, is the best example, by virtue of its explicit relationship to time.

²⁴ The watch is also indicative (as is the disappearance of clocks) of the irresistible tendency of modern objects towards miniaturization and individualization. It is also the oldest, the smallest, the closest to us, and the most valuable of personal machines — an intimate and highly cathected mechanical talisman which becomes the object of everyday complicity, fascination (especially for children), and jealousy.

²⁵ Exactness about time parallels speed in space: time has to be gobbled up as completely as possible.

Objects and Time: A Controlled Cycle

The problem of time is a fundamental aspect of collecting. As Maurice Rheims says: 'A phenomenon that often goes hand in hand with the passion for collecting is the loss of any sense of the present time.'²⁶ But is this really just a matter of an escape into nostalgia? Certainly, someone who identifies with Louis XVI down to the feet of his armchairs, or develops a true passion for sixteenth-century snuffboxes, is marking himself off from the present by means of a historical reference, yet this reference takes second place to his direct experience of collecting's systematic aspect. The deep-rooted power of collected objects stems neither from their uniqueness nor from their historical distinctiveness. It is not because of such considerations that the temporality of collecting is not real time but, rather, *because the organization of the collection itself replaces time*. And no doubt this is the collection's fundamental function: the resolving of real time into a systematic dimension. Taste, particularity, status, the discourse of society — any of these may cause the collection to open onto a broader relationship (though this will never go beyond a group of insiders); in all cases, however, the collection must remain, literally, a 'pastime'. Indeed, it abolishes time. More precisely, by reducing time to a fixed set of terms navigable in either direction, the collection represents the continual recommencement of a controlled cycle whereby man, at any moment and with complete confidence, starting with any term and sure of returning to it, is able to set his game of life and death in motion.

It is in this sense that the environment of private objects and their possession (collection being the most extreme instance) is a dimension of our life which, though imaginary, is absolutely essential. Just as essential as dreams. It has been said that if dreams could be experimentally suppressed, serious mental disturbances would quickly ensue. It is certainly true that were it possible to deprive people of the regressive escape offered by the game of possession, if they were prevented from giving voice to their controlled, self-addressed discourse, from using objects to recite themselves, as it were, outside time, then mental disorder would surely follow immediately, just as in the case of dream deprivation. We cannot live in absolute singularity, in the irreversibility signalled by the moment of birth, and it is precisely this irreversible movement from birth towards death that objects help us to cope with.

Of course the balance thus achieved is a neurotic one; of course this bulwark against anxiety is regressive, for time is objectively irreversible, after all, and even the objects whose function it is to protect us from it are perforce themselves carried off by it; and of course the defence mechanism that imposes discontinuity by means of objects is forever being contested, for the world and human beings

²⁶ *La vie étrange des objets*, p. 42.

are in reality *continuous*. But can we really speak here in terms of normality or anomaly? Taking refuge in a closed synchronicity may certainly be deemed denial of reality and flight if one considers that the object is the recipient of a cathexis that 'ought' to have been invested in human relationships. But this is the price we pay for the vast regulating power of these mechanisms, which today, with the disappearance of the old religious and ideological authorities, are becoming the consolation of consolations, the everyday mythology absorbing all the *angst* that attends time, that attends death.

It should be clear that we are not here promoting any spontaneous mythology according to which man somehow extends his life or survives his death by means of the objects he possesses. The refuge-seeking procedure I have been describing depends not on an immortality, an eternity or a survival founded on the object *qua* reflection (something which man has basically never believed in) but, rather, on a more complex action which 'recycles' birth and death into a *system of objects*. What man gets from objects is not a guarantee of life after death but *the possibility, from the present moment onwards, of continually experiencing the unfolding of his existence in a controlled, cyclical mode, symbolically transcending a real existence the irreversibility of whose progression he is powerless to affect*.

We are not far from the ball which the child (in Freud's account) causes to disappear and reappear in order to experience the absence and presence of its mother alternately (*Fort! Da! Fort! Da!*) — in order to counter her anxiety-provoking absence with this infinite cycle of disappearance and reappearance of the object. The symbolic implications of play within the series are not hard to discern here, and we may sum them up by saying that the object is *the thing with which we construct our mourning*: the object represents our own death, but that death is transcended (symbolically) by virtue of the fact that we *possess* the object; the fact that by introjecting it into a work of mourning — by integrating it into a series in which its absence and its re-emergence elsewhere 'work' at replaying themselves continually, recurrently — we succeed in dispelling the anxiety associated with absence and with the reality of death. Objects allow us to apply the work of mourning to ourselves right now, in everyday life, and this in turn allows us to live — to live regressively, no doubt, but at least to live. A person who collects is dead, but he literally survives himself through his collection, which (even while he lives) duplicates him infinitely, beyond death, *by integrating death itself into the series, into the cycle*. Once again the parallel with dreams applies here. If any object's function — practical, cultural or social — means that it is the mediation of a *wish*, it is also, as one term among others in the systematic game that we have been describing, the voice of *desire*. Desire is, in fact, the motor of the repetition or substitution of oneself, along the infinite chain of signifiers, through or beyond death. And if the function of dreams is to ensure

the continuity of sleep, that of objects, thanks to very much the same sort of compromise, is to ensure the continuity of life.²⁷

The Sequestered Object: Jealousy

At the terminal point of its regressive movement, the passion for objects ends up as pure jealousy. The joy of possession in its most profound form now derives from the value that objects can have for others and from the fact of depriving them thereof. This jealous complex, though it is characteristic of the collector at his most fanatical, presides also, proportionately speaking, over the simplest proprietary reflex. A powerful anal-sadistic impulse, it produces the urge to sequester beauty so as to be the only one to enjoy it: a kind of sexually perverse behaviour widely present in a diffuse form in the relationship to objects.

What does the sequestered object represent? (Its objective value is secondary, of course — its attraction lies in the very fact of its confinement.) If you do not lend your car, your fountain pen or your wife to anyone, that is because these objects, according to the logic of jealousy, are narcissistic equivalents of the ego: to lose them, or for them to be damaged, means castration. The phallus, to put it in a nutshell, is not something one loans out. What the jealous owner sequesters and cleaves to is his own libido, in the shape of an object, which he is striving to exorcize by means of a system of confinement — the same system, in fact, by virtue of which collecting dispels anxiety about death. He castrates himself out of anguish about his own sexuality; or, more exactly, he uses a symbolic castration — sequestration — pre-emptively, as a way of countering anxiety about *real* castration.²⁸ This desperate strategy is the basis of the horrible gratification that jealousy affords. For one is always jealous of oneself. It is oneself that one locks up and guards so closely. And it is from oneself that one obtains gratification.

²⁷ A story told by Tristan Bernard provides an amusing illustration of the fact that collecting is a way of playing with death (that is, a passion), and in consequence stronger, symbolically, than death itself. There was once a man who collected children: legitimate, illegitimate, children of a first or a second marriage, foundlings, by-blows, and so on. One day he gave a house party at which his entire 'collection' were present: a cynical friend of his remarked, however, 'There is one kind of child you do not have.' 'What type?' the host wanted to know. 'A posthumous child,' came the answer. Whereupon this passionate collector first got his wife pregnant and promptly thereafter committed suicide.

The same system is to be found, minus the narrative trappings, in games of chance. This is the reason for their fascination, which is even more intense than that of collecting. Such games imply a pure transcendence of death: subjectivity cathects the pure series with an imaginary mastery, quite certain that whatever the ups and downs of the play, no one has the power to reintroduce into it the *real* conditions of life and death.

²⁸ Of course this also goes for pets, and by extension for the 'object' in the sexual relationship, whose manipulation in jealousy is of a similar kind.

Obviously, this jealous pleasure occurs in a context of absolute disillusionment, because systematic regression can never completely eradicate consciousness of the real world or of the futility of such behaviour. The same goes for collecting, whose sway is fragile at best, for the sway of the real world lies ever just behind it, and is continually threatening it. Yet this disillusionment is itself part of the system — indeed, is as responsible as satisfaction for setting the system in motion: disillusionment never refers to the world but, rather, to an ulterior term; disillusionment and satisfaction occupy sequential positions in the cycle. The neurotic activation of the system is thus attributable to this constitutive disillusionment. In such cases the series tends to run its course at a faster and faster pace, chasing its tail as differences wear out and the substitution mechanism speeds up. The system may even enter a destructive phase, implying the self-destruction of the subject. Maurice Rheims evokes the ritualized ‘execution’ of collections — a kind of suicide based on the impossibility of ever circumscribing death. It is not rare in the context of the system of jealousy for the subject eventually to destroy the sequestered object or being out of a feeling that he can never completely rid himself of the adversity of the world, and of his own sexuality. This is the logical and illogical end of his passion.²⁹

The Object Destructured: Perversion

The effectiveness of the system of possession is directly linked to its regressive character. And this regression in turn is linked to the very *modus operandi* of perversion. If perversion as it concerns objects is most clearly discernible in the crystallized form of fetishism, we are perfectly justified in noting how throughout the system, organized according to the same aims and functioning in the same ways, the possession of objects and the passion for them is, shall we say, *a tempered mode of sexual perversion*. Indeed, just as possession depends on the discontinuity of the series (real or virtual) and on the choice of a privileged term within it, so sexual perversion is founded on the inability to apprehend the other *qua* object of desire in his or her unique totality as a person, to grasp the other in any but a discontinuous way: the other is transformed into the paradigm of various eroticized parts of the body, a single one of which becomes the focus of objectification. A particular woman is no longer a woman but merely a sex, breasts, belly, thighs, voice and face — and preferably just one of them.³⁰ She

²⁹ We must not confuse disillusionment, an internal motor of the regressive system of the series, with the lack we spoke of above, which on the contrary tends to foster emergence from the system. Disillusionment causes the subject to tighten his retrogressive embrace of the series; lack causes him to evolve (relatively speaking) in the direction of the outside world.

³⁰ The regressive tendency, ever more specialized and impersonal, may converge on the hair or the feet, or, ultimately, crystallize — at the opposite pole to any living being — on a garter or a

thus becomes a constituent 'object' in a series whose different terms are gazetted by desire, and whose real referent is by no means the loved person but, rather, the subject himself, collecting and eroticizing himself and turning the relationship of love into a discourse directed towards him alone.

The opening sequence in Jean-Luc Godard's film *Contempt* clearly illustrates this. The dialogue in this 'nude' scene goes as follows.

'Do you love my feet?' the woman asks. (Note that throughout the scene she is inventorying herself in a mirror — this is not irrelevant, because in this way she attributes value to herself *as she is seen*, via her image, and thus, already, as spatially discontinuous.)

'Yes, I love them.'

Do you love my legs?'

'Yes.'

'And my thighs?'

'Yes,' he replies once more. 'I love them.,

(And so on, from foot to head, ending up with her hair.)

'So, you love me totally?'

'Yes, I love you totally.'

'Me too, Paul,' she says, summing up the situation.

It may be that the film's makers saw all this as the clarifying algebra of a demystified love. Be that as it may, such a grotesque reconstruction of desire is the height of inhumanity. Once broken down by body parts into a series, the woman as pure object is then reintegrated into the greater series of all woman-objects, where she is merely one term among others. The only activity possible within the logic of this system is the play of substitutions. This was what we recognized earlier as the motor of satisfaction in the collector.

In the love relationship the tendency to break the object down into discrete details in accordance with a perverse autoerotic system is slowed by the living unity of the other person.³¹ When it comes to material objects, however, and especially to manufactured objects complex enough to lend themselves to mental dismantling, this tendency has free rein. With the automobile, for instance, it is possible to speak of '*my* brakes', '*my* tail fins', '*my* steering wheel'; or to say '*I* am braking', '*I* am turning' or '*I* am starting'. In short, all the car's 'organs' and functions may be brought separately into relation with the person of the owner in the possessive mode. We are dealing here not with a process of personalization at the social level but with a process of a projective kind. We are concerned not with *having* but with *being*. With the horse, despite the fact that this animal was a

brassiere; we thus come back to the material object, whose possession may be described as the perfect way of eliminating the presence of the other.

³¹ This explains why the passionate feelings are transferred to the fetish, whose function is a radical simplification of the living sexual object which makes this object equivalent to the penis and cathects it accordingly.

remarkable instrument of power and transcendence for man, this kind of confusion was never possible. The fact is that the horse is not made of pieces — and above all, that it is *sexed*. We can say ‘my horse’ or ‘my wife’, but that is as far as this kind of possessive denomination can go. That which has a sex resists fragmenting projection and hence also the mode of appropriation that we have identified as a perversion.³² Faced by a living being, we may say ‘my’ but we cannot say ‘I’ as we do when we symbolically appropriate the functions and ‘organs’ of a car. That type of regression is not available to us. The horse may be the recipient of powerful symbolic cathexes: we associate it with the wild sexuality of the rutting season, as with the wisdom of the centaur; its head is a terrifying phantasy linked to the image of the father, yet its calm embodies the protective strength of Cheiron the teacher. It is never cathected, however, in the simplistic, narcissistic, far more impoverished and infantile manner in which the ego is projected onto structural details of cars (in accordance with an almost delusional analogy with disassociated parts and functions of the human body). The existence of a dynamic symbolism of the horse may be attributed precisely to the fact that isolated identifications with distinct functions or organs of the horse are an impossibility; nor is there any prospect, therefore, of collapsing this relationship into an autoerotic ‘discourse’ concerned with disconnected elements.

Fragmentation and regression of that kind presuppose a technique, but one which has become autonomous at the level of the part-object. A woman broken down into a syntagma of erogenous zones is classified exclusively by the functionality of pleasure, to which the response is an objectivizing and ritualizing erotic technique that masks the anxiety associated with the interpersonal relationship while at the same time serving as a genuine (gestural and effective) dose of reality at the very heart of perversion as a phantasy system. The fact is that every mental system needs a credibility factor of this sort — a foothold in the real, a technical rationale or justification. Thus the accelerator referred to in the words ‘I am accelerating’, or the whole car implied when we say ‘my car’, serves as the real, technical justification for a whole realm of narcissistic annexation *short* of reality. The same goes for erotic technique, when it is accepted for what it is; for at this level we are no longer in the genital sphere, which opens onto reality, onto pleasure, but, rather, in a regressive, anal sphere of sexual systematizing for which erotic gestures are merely the justification.

Clearly, then, ‘technical’ is a very long way indeed from implying ‘objective’. Technique does have this quality when it is socialized, when it is adopted by technology, and when it informs new structures. In the everyday realm, however, it constitutes a field that is always hospitable to regressive

³² By the same token possessive identification operates in the case of living beings only to the extent that such beings may be perceived as asexual: ‘Does our head hurt?’, we may say to a baby. When we are confronted by a sexed being, however, this kind of confusional identification is halted by castration anxiety.

phantasies, because the possibility of a destructuring is ever imminent. Once assembled and mounted, the components of a technical object imply a certain coherence. But such a structure is always vulnerable to the human mind: held together from without by its function, it is purely formal for the psyche. The hierarchy of its elements can be dismantled at any time, and those elements made interchangeable within a paradigmatic system which the subject uses for his self-recitation. The object is discontinuous already — and certainly easy for thought to disassemble. Moreover, the task is all the easier now that the object — especially the technical object — is no longer lent unity by a set of human gestures and by human energy. Another reason why the car, in contrast to the horse, is such a perfect object for the purposes of narcissistic manipulation is that mastery over the horse is muscular and active, and calls for a gestural system designed to maintain balance, whereas mastery over a car is simplified, functional and abstract.

From Serial Motivation to Real Motivation

Hitherto our discussion has paid no heed whatsoever to the actual nature of the objects that are collected: we have concentrated on the systematic aspects of collecting and ignored the thematic. It is obvious, however, that collecting masterpieces is not exactly the same thing as collecting cigar bands. First of all, a distinction must be drawn between the concept of collection (Latin *colligere*, to choose and gather together) and the concept of accumulation. At the simplest level, matter of one kind or another is accumulated: old papers are piled up, or quantities of food are stored. This activity falls somewhere between oral introjection and anal retention. At a somewhat higher level lies the serial accumulation of identical objects. As for collecting proper, it has a door open onto culture, being concerned with differentiated objects which often have exchange value, which may also be ‘objects’ of preservation, trade, social ritual, exhibition — perhaps even generators of profit. Such objects are accompanied by projects. And though they remain interrelated, their interplay involves the social world outside, and embraces human relationships.

However powerful external motivations may be, collections can never escape from their internal systematization; at best they may represent a compromise between internal and external factors, and even when a collection transforms itself into a discourse addressed to others, it continues to be first and foremost a discourse addressed to oneself. Serial motivation is discernible everywhere. Research shows that buyers of books published in series (such as

10/18 or *Que sais-je?*³³), once they are caught up in collecting, will even acquire titles of no interest to them: the distinctiveness of the book relative to the series itself thus suffices to create a purely formal interest which replaces any real one. The motive of purchase is nothing but this contingent association. A comparable kind of behaviour is that of people who cannot read comfortably unless they are surrounded by all their books; in such cases the specificity of what is being read tends to evaporate. Even farther down the same path, the book itself may count less than the moment when it is put back in its proper place on the shelf. Conversely, once a collector's enthusiasm for a series wanes it is very difficult to revive, and now he may not even buy volumes of genuine interest to him. This is as much evidence as we need to draw a clear distinction between serial motivation and real motivation. The two are mutually exclusive and can coexist only on the basis of compromise, with a notable tendency, founded on inertia, for serial motivation to carry the day over the dialectical motivation of interest.³⁴

Mere collecting, however, may sometimes create real interest. The person who sets out to buy every title in the *Que sais-je?* series may end up confining his collection to a single subject, such as music or sociology. Once a certain quantitative threshold is reached, sheer accumulation may occasionally give way to a measure of discrimination. There is no hard-and-fast rule here. Artistic masterpieces *may* be collected with the same regressive fanaticism as cheese labels; on the other hand, children who collect stamps are continually swapping them with their friends. No iron-clad connection exists, therefore, between a collection's thematic complexity and its real openness to the outside world. At best such complexity may give us a clue, may be grounds for a presumption of openness.

A collection can emancipate itself from unalloyed accumulation not only by virtue of its cultural complexity but also by virtue of what is missing from it, by virtue of its incompleteness. A lack here is always a specific demand, an appeal for such and such an absent object. And this demand, in the shape of research, passion, or messages to other people,³⁵ suffices to shatter that fatal

³³ [Translator's note: These are well-known series of pocket books in uniform format. *Que sais-je?* is a series of short monographs on a vast array of topics.]

³⁴ This distinction between serial satisfaction and pleasure proper is an essential one. True pleasure is a sort of pleasure-in-pleasure whereby mere satisfaction is transcended as such, and grounds itself in a relationship. In serial satisfaction, by contrast, this second-level pleasure, this qualitative dimension of pleasure, disappears, is missing or unfulfilled. Satisfaction must depend on linear succession alone: an unattainable totality is extended by means of projection and compensated for by means of repetition. People stop reading the books they buy, then proceed to buy more and more. Similarly the repetition of the sexual act, or a multiplicity of sexual partners, may serve indefinitely as an ersatz form of love as exploration. Pleasure in pleasure is gone, only satisfaction remains — and the two are mutually exclusive.

³⁵ Even in this case, however, the collector tends to call upon other people solely as observers of his collection, integrating them as third parties only in an already constituted subject-object relationship.

enchantment of the collector which plunges him into a state of pure fascination. A recent television programme on collecting made the point well: every collector who presented his collection to the viewing audience would mention the very special ‘object’ that he did not have, and invite everyone to find it for him. So, even though objects may on occasion lead into the realm of social discourse, it must be acknowledged that *it is usually not an object’s presence but far more often its absence that clears the way for social intercourse.*

A Discourse Addressed to Oneself

It remains characteristic of the collection that sooner or later a radical change will occur capable of wrenching it out of its regressive system and orientating it towards a project or task (whether status-related, cultural or commercial is of no consequence, just so long as an object eventually brings one human being face to face with another — at which point the object has become a message). All the same, no matter how open a collection is, it will always harbour an irreducible element of non-relationship to the world. Because he feels alienated and abolished by a social discourse whose rules escape him, the collector strives to reconstitute a discourse that is transparent to him, a discourse whose signifiers he controls and whose referent *par excellence* is himself. In this he is doomed to failure: he cannot see that he is simply transforming an open-ended objective discontinuity into a closed subjective one, where even the language he uses has lost any general validity. This kind of totalization by means of objects always bears the stamp of solitude. It fails to communicate with the outside, and communication is missing within it. In point of fact, moreover, we cannot avoid the question whether objects can indeed ever come to constitute any other language than this: can man ever use objects to set up a language that is more than a discourse addressed to himself?

The collector is never an utterly hopeless fanatic, precisely because he collects objects that in some way always prevent him from regressing into the ultimate abstraction of a delusional state, but at the same time the discourse he thus creates can never — for the very same reason — get beyond a certain poverty and infantilism. Collecting is always a limited, repetitive process, and the very material objects with which it is concerned are too concrete and too discontinuous ever to be articulated as a true dialectical structure.³⁶ So if non-collectors are indeed ‘nothing but morons’, collectors, for their part, invariably have something impoverished and inhuman about them.

³⁶ As distinct from science or memory, for example — which also involve collecting, but the collecting of facts or knowledge.