

Stranger, Seducer
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'Enacting or, Shall I say, Acting Out', London, November 2009

An object speaks to a subject. It says: 'Here I am. I am offering myself to you.'

It is the early hours of a morning in 1961 and Audrey Hepburn, as Holly Golightly, steps out of a taxi with a paper cup and a wrapped pastry. She is dressed in a black satin evening gown designed by Hubert de Givenchy.¹ She is wearing sunglasses to cover tired eyes. She is making her way to her flat after a night out. But Holly has a fantasy, ignited by an image, which she seeks before going home. The image that seduces her is that of herself in relation to the objects displayed in the shop window of the famous Fifth Avenue jewellers Tiffany and Co. She is held there, almost suspended, with the coffee and pastry in her hand, not quite able to take her eyes away. As viewers, we are seduced by this scene of seduction and the film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is not anymore about Holly's fantasies of jewels but rather about our seduction of her being seduced; a subject converted into an object; just like the woman in the work *Enacting, or Shall I Say, Acting Out*.²

An object speaks to a subject. It says: 'Hey, you! Yes, you! Could you come here, please?'³ The subject, in an attempt to understand the moment of trauma provoked by this address, photographs the object. The subject and the object are both strangers to each other but are seduced by their respective mysteries. What does this consist of?

Seduction is a complex object of study. It is a principle; Jean Baudrillard writes that 'everything is seduction and nothing but seduction'.⁴ It is also a phenomenon,⁵ a process,⁶ and a practice, as Giacomo Casanova, the Marquis de Sade, and other libertine writers well knew.⁷ The most comprehensive yet open definition comes from Rex Butler who, paraphrasing Baudrillard, writes that seduction is 'the getting of another to do what we want, not by force or coercion, but by an exercise of their own, though often mistaken or misguided, free will'.⁸ One can see from this that the definition is complex, and that seduction is something that applies to many fields of study, from criminology to marketing, from philosophy to popular psychology and, of course, psychoanalysis. Yet there are a number of constants in all the literature available on the topic and I want to propose

four rules of seduction.

First rule: seduction belongs to objects. This principle has been best articulated by Baudrillard in *Fatal Strategies*: 'Only the subject desires; only the object seduces'.⁹ Seduction and desire are not discrete terms, but continuous with each other. They seem to relate to each other as if part of a moëbius strip, a topological surface with one single side and only one boundary component. As the two sides are continuous, a crossover from inside to outside and back is possible. However, when one passes a finger round the surface of the moëbius strip, it is impossible to say at which precise point the crossing has taken place. To paraphrase Slavoj Žižek, seduction is not a simple reverse of content, rather 'we encounter it when we progress far enough on the side' of desire itself.¹⁰ Seduction, in and through Jacques Lacan's *objet petit a* – the object cause of desire, not the object to which desire is directed, but that which provokes desire – seduces desire and then moves on. There is something of *objet petit a* in the object's address to the woman in my image, in its voice (for it speaks) and in its gaze. These are the scopic and invocatory drives.

Second rule: the choice of an object of seduction depends on the individual subject. Seduction is something that is not fully generalisable. There is no one seductive object, other than *objet petit a*, although some objects stand for it for a wide variety of people.

Third rule: seduction is seductive. In order to seduce, one has to be seduced first. Baudrillard writes: 'The illusion that leads from the one to the other is subtle. Is it to seduce, or to be seduced, that is seductive? But to be seduced is the best way to seduce'.¹¹ Seduction is a matter of two – and a few more. In its doubling, there is a reversibility, a space for its self-destruction. This is particularly evident in the photograph I show you above; it is the remnant of one woman's hysterical journey through a contemporary shopping arcade with its obscene displays. In this image, and others from this series, the subject shifts from the position of the hysteric to that of the pervert. The shift is also from seducer to the seduced. The hysteric asks of the object (and the big Other, of course¹²), 'What do you want from me?'¹³ while the pervert says 'Hey, look at me!', enjoys displaying herself, looking at the object and being looked at by it.

Fourth rule: seduction is pervasive. It will seduce everything, especially my attempts to study it. How can one overcome this, which already posed a problem for Freud – as the abandonment of his seduction theory shows – and for Baudrillard? As Rex Butler writes :

we would say that Baudrillard's writing embodies this disorder, does not try to master it or comment upon it but is subject to it, an effect of it. In speaking of the fundamental seduction of the world, it too wants to be seduced. It is to know that, insofar as what he is speaking of is true, he cannot say what it is, cannot directly imitate it. It is only by driving the inner logic of his writing to its furthest point, by it imitating nothing but itself, that he might somehow capture it, that this seduction might come about in writing or this writing be shown to be an effect of seduction.¹⁴

Concerning seduction as an object of study, Baudrillard writes: 'The charm of seduction is first to be an unidentified theoretical object, a non-analytical object and which thus obstructs any truth-theory, leaving room for the fiction-theory and the pleasure of its pursuit'.¹⁵ Well, the answer to my problem, as Baudrillard ascertains, is to be seduced; to allow oneself to be seduced, however, with a tool that allows the capture of the moment of seduction. This is what I call the self-reflexive methodology. It is comprised of three steps. First, recognition: for recognition – the seduction *per se* – to take place, the subject has to identify, see, and accept herself in the object, or understand the object as a part of herself that is beyond herself, a surplus. It is in this recognition that the psychodynamic elements of seduction take place and the imaginary awakens to the possibilities seduction offers. For this to happen – and, by extension, for recognition to occur – the subject has to position herself in such a way as to be able to see herself through the other. Real and imaginary worlds, just like seduction and desire, have to enter into a reversible relation. Secondly, capture. Capture in this context refers to two processes: the literal capture of the subject by the object (part of the process of seduction) and the recording of this operation (part of method of studying seduction). Last, reflection: while the other two steps are relatively descriptive, reflection is the most difficult one to complete. But it is the one that will ascertain that seduction did take place, through

relating the recognition and capture to the context in which seduction operates. The framework for this analysis comes from various sources, from the clinical dream interpretation, free association, and evenly-hovering-attention, to that developed by the artist Daniel Spoerri's work *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*.¹⁶

Photography, writing, and psychoanalysis (not only as theory, but as a practice in which one engages) have been the media that have best worked for the second step, the capture, the key link between recognition and reflection. In my writing in particular I have attempted to involve the reader in a play of mirrors similar to the one in which I have found myself. In it, I am a detective, a woman, an artist, an investigator; enacting—or, shall I say, acting out—seduction, falling for it while making the text fall for me. Françoise Collin already uses this strategy when she writes 'to write is to enter into seduction'.¹⁷ Yet there are some writings that are more conducive to this—letters, detective stories, dialogues, case expositions, witness accounts—as they directly address the reader. I chose to develop a structure that circles around the invocatory and scopic drives, between voice—in the form of a written dialogue between a woman and a diamond ring inspired by the Marquis de Sade's *Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man*—and gaze, through photographs.

The inclusion of the detective was necessary, in addition to her investigative associations and her seductive characteristics—detectives lead readers, sometimes astray, as in Vladimir Nabokov's *Despair*¹⁸—also to provide a distancing device, a forensic look into a case in which I am both the subject and the object. Becoming the centre of my own research, although I resisted it for a while, became absolutely necessary. As French writer Roger Lewinter puts it: 'Indeed, one is never tempted—seduced—but by oneself'.¹⁹ To make it work in my case, a number of steps had to be taken: the instances of seduction chose me, rather than me taking a controlled approach on them, the detective had to be given voice as a meta-reflective entity in the whole text, all assertions had to be verified by the evidence in the form of the photographs and the dialogue (which, by the way, was constructed in front of the photographs displayed at exhibitions and in front of the objects, that is, written standing up in the street, much to the disturbance of security guards who could not understand the relation between my wet eyes and my working pen). The writing of the dialogue was, therefore, not a wholly personal enterprise. Even if subjective, it gives body to Karl Marx's thought 'if commodities could speak...';²⁰ and, in a sense, to his desire and mine.

The relation between desire and its object is often portrayed as negative and aporetic; we desire what we cannot have, and this structure also characterises gaze and voice. Both are essence-less objects, areas of analytical impossibility and theoretical resistance. They have the function of interpellation, as they are related to the experiences of addressing and being addressed. The experience of being addressed is imposed from the outside and cannot be readily defended against. For that reason, voice and gaze can become invasive and threatening. The self-reflexive methodology, amongst other things, helps to modulate this experience, through the screens of the capture and the reflection. The writings, the camera, the shop windows regulate the seductive relationship and, while doing so, render it visible. As Belgian psychologist and anthropologist Francis Martens wrote: 'It is thus that seduction, the mirror and the mask also have a function of truth and unveiling'.²¹ In my own (let us say primal) seduction, which took place in front of a work of art—Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés*—a Spanish door acted as a screen.²² I wanted to see what was behind and could not reach the peepholes on the door, so I had to invent a contraption involving standing in two shoes on one foot while holding tight onto the door. I was very conscious of the act of looking, which was pure self-seduction.

The woman's encounter with her object is part of a very joyous, yet traumatic phenomenon. She is terrified by its meaning and its consequences. She is terrified when addressed by the object, when faced with her own desire. It is precisely this overwhelming terror one cannot work through which makes an event traumatic. It is an experience of chaos—the order would be for the woman to continue her usual journey to work—that contradicts the subject's beliefs, where words fail and where the subject has been let down by psychic defence mechanisms. It manifests itself by a re-experienced raw sensorial memory, evident in the repetition of the circumstances leading to the photographs. In Lacanian terms, it is an invasion of the Real into the Symbolic.²³

The fall of language is present in these images: the mouth is open, yet remains silent. But trauma is not inherent to events. It does not manifest itself 'until an event later in life supervenes,

an event which by its nature resembles or confirms unconscious concepts and fantasies related to the original trauma. These secondary events in themselves constitute, as it were, a replication of the original trauma'. The finding of the object is the finding of what we lost in the past but we forgot about (the *objet petit a*).²⁴ The crocodile clutch bag is not *objet petit a*, though, but something in it is, so when it takes the place of the lost object, the encounter fails necessarily. A traumatic event happens in reality, not fantasy, but fantasy has a key role to play in the particular trauma of seduction.

Since the beginnings of psychoanalysis, fantasy – and the deeper 'phantasy' of Freud's *Standard Edition*, which refers to the unconscious content of the drives – has been bound up with seduction. In his letters to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, Freud explains his discovery of instances of childhood seduction in most of the hysteria and obsessional neurosis cases he was treating, thus finding a possible causal link for the afflictions.²⁵ On the 14 August 1897, however, he writes: 'I no longer believe in my *neurotica*', describing how he had understood that the seductions recounted by his patients were fantasies.²⁶ This is the abandonment of the seduction theory. As Dylan Evans argues, fantasy refers to conscious psychic content. It is an eminently visual scene in the imagination which stages an unconscious desire and in which the subject plays a part. Evans discusses its protective function and writes that 'Lacan compares the fantasy scene to a frozen image on a cinema screen; just as the film may be stopped at a certain point in order to avoid showing a traumatic scene which follows, so also the fantasy scene is a defence'.²⁷ This defence against trauma is a representation of the subject's *jouissance* but distorted in a compromise formation, for representing *jouissance* itself is part of the trauma fantasies are trying to defend against. 'The phantasy is the support of desire',²⁸ but 'in its fundamental use, fantasy is the means by which the subject maintains himself at the level of his vanishing desire, vanishing inasmuch as the very satisfaction of demand deprives him of his object'.²⁹ In fantasy, a subject tallies with her object, and this is frightening. Fantasy, in its relation to desire, is paradoxical, linking the fading or eclipse of the subject to the condition of an object.³⁰ This relation of subject and object through fantasy is essential to the link between desire (on the side of the subject) and seduction (on the side of the object). This fantasy is evident in the screen that makes the visual encounter between subject and object possible, and the photographic camera, which renders it lasting, at least until reflection is possible. Through producing an image of the image in fantasy, its place in the symbolic structure is made manifest.³¹ Thus, the reflection element of the methodology I am proposing helps to make sense of the seductive encounter, if the evidence is constantly returned to.

In the conversation between the woman and her object, the latter promises her something. The psychoanalyst Antoine Vergote, in his study on divinity and the devil, explores the issues of exchange, promises, and what the seducer and the seducee give away in the relationship. He writes:

The collusion between the desires of the subject and the seducer means that the gift offered is binding and that the seduced subject submits to the will of the seducer. What this diabolical disguise hides deep, is that in the last-instance the gift is the gift of nothing. For the seducing devil does not give himself. It possesses. It does not enter into a system of exchange, it does not give but certain things in exchange for the total gift of the seduced subject himself.³²

Seduction might not have given me all in this quest. Yet, I am confident that what it has been forced to trade with me in exchange for my seduction – parts of its mode of working – is valuable knowledge, all the more useful thanks to self-reflexive methodology.

To name seduction is to conjure it, but there is always something that remains un-writeable, un-photographable, there is something beyond symbolisation when speaking of seduction. This is because of our own involvement in it. As Maurice Olender and Jacques Sojcher write: 'The concept would leave here some of its feathers [...] seduction would thus have the last word'.³³

NOTES

1. According to Christie's who auctioned the dress, she was wearing a 'sleeveless, floor-length gown with fitted bodice embellished at the back with distinctive cut-out décolleté, the skirt slightly gathered at the waist and slit to the thigh on one side, labelled inside on the waistband *Givenchy*; accompanied by a pair of black elbow-length gloves [made later].' Christie's, *Lot 111/Sale 4912: Audrey Hepburn Breakfast At Tiffany's*, 1961, available from <http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=4832498> [accessed 27.06.10].
2. *Enacting or, Shall I Say; Acting Out* is part of *Make Me Yours*, a collection of photographs showing the seduction of a woman in contemporary shopping arcades. The images, consisting of reflections in shop windows capturing the interaction between her (me) and her objects (diamond rings, shoes, underwear, designer bags, sequin dresses), are arranged in a photo-book, which was submitted for a doctoral degree in 2010 as the companion piece to the thesis *Make Me Yours: The Psychodynamics of Seduction Through Works of Art*. The full work can be viewed on <<http://www.lauragonzalez.co.uk/make-me-yours/>>.
3. The notion of interpellation, of being called out by an object is linked to the development of subjectivity in the child in the context of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's mirror stage. Louis Althusser coined the word interpellation (or hailing) in relation to ideology and how this changes individuals into subjects by calling out to them: 'Hey, you there!'. Interpellation involves recognition, interaction, identification and identity formation, as the usual answer to this hailing is 'Yes, it really is me!'. The seductive object, in its primordial quality of player of a principle, also interpellates the subject, supplementing Althusser's 'Hey, you there!' with 'Look at me! Take me! Make me yours!'. Louis Althusser (1970), *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)*, tr. by Ben Brewster, 2007, <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>> [accessed 02.12.07].
4. Jean Baudrillard (1979), *Seduction*, tr. by Brian Singer, New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1991, p. 83.
5. See, for example, Gilles Lipovetsky (1987), *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, tr. by Catherine Porter, Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1994.
6. As described, amongst others, by Robert Greene, *The Art of Seduction*, London: Profile Books, 2004.
7. Giacomo Casanova (1825), *History of My Life*, 12 vols, tr. by Willard R. Trask, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997; Marquis de Sade (1788), *The Misfortunes of Virtue and Other Early Tales*, tr. by David Coward, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992; Marquis de Sade (1795), *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, tr. by Joachim Neugroschel, London: Penguin, 2006; Michel Feher, ed., *The Libertine Reader: Eroticism and Enlightenment in eighteenth-century France*, New York: Zone Books, 1997.
8. Rex Butler, *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real*, London: Sage, 1999, p. 71.
9. Jean Baudrillard (1983), *Fatal Strategies*, tr. by Philip Beitchman and W. G. J. Nieslichowski, London: Pluto Press, 1999, p. 111.
10. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, London: Verso, 1991, p. 230.
11. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 81.
12. The big Other (or A) in Lacanian theory stands for the internalisation of the voice of law, whether as one's parents, teachers, governments, or, perhaps, the police, for example. It is a concept linked to Sigmund Freud's agency of the Super-Ego. Although both letters stand for the word 'other' (*autre* in French), the A of the big Other is different from the *a* in objet petit *a*, the other of reflexivity.
13. Julia Borossa places hysteria between handicap and empowerment, the flip side of feminism and the result of patriarchal oppression, the pathological effect of patriarchy and its subversion. This is due to the ambiguity and contradiction in the hysteric's position. She writes: 'Hysterical symptoms are caused by the contradiction between two impulses: a wanting which accepts no limits, and a desire to conform to the limits imposed by society.' Julia Borossa, *Ideas in Psychoanalysis: Hysteria*, Cambridge: Icon books, 2001, p. 41. Georges Didi-Huberman, in addition, added a performative element to the hysteric's symptoms, as well as a strong transference relationship with their doctor (as we can also see in Freud's Dora). Georges Didi-Huberman (1982), *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, tr. by Alisa Hartz, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.
14. Butler, *The Defence of the Real*, p. 101.
15. Jean Baudrillard, 'Les abîmes superficiels', in *La séduction*, ed. by Maurice Olender and Jacques Sojcher, Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1980, pp. 197-207 (p.197). My translation. The original passage reads: '*Le charme de la séduction est d'abord d'être un objet théorique non identifié, objet non analytique et qui par là fait échec à toute théorie-vérité, laissant place à la théorie-fiction et au plaisir de son exercice*'.
16. Daniel Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, London: Atlas Press, 1995.
17. Françoise Collin, 'Le séducteur cache la séduction', in *La séduction*, ed. by Maurice Olender and Jacques Sojcher, Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1980, pp. 189-196 (p. 195). My translation. The original text reads: '*écrire c'est entrer dans la séduction*'.
18. Vladimir Nabokov (1936), *Despair*, tr. by the author, London: Panther, 1969.
19. Roger Lewinter, 'La comédie magnétique', in *La séduction*, ed. by Maurice Olender and Jacques Sojcher,

- Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1980, pp. 11–15 (p.15). My translation from ‘*en effet, on n’est jamais tenté–séduit– que par soi*’.
20. ‘If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values.’ Karl Marx (1867), *Capital. Volume I*, tr. by Ben Fowkes, London: Penguin, 1976, pp. 176–177. Commodities, in general, cannot speak but jewels have been known to talk in certain fictional stories, mainly related to the seductive practices of the libertines (see, for example, Denis Diderot (1748) ‘The Indiscreet Jewels’, in Michel Feher, ed., *The Libertine Reader*, pp. 344–541, although, of course, the jewels in this case and those in Diderot’s story are not of the same kind). A jewel case also features in one of Dora’s dreams, as something she wants to save from a fire. Sigmund Freud (1905) ‘Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and tr. by James Strachey and others, London: Vintage, 2001, vol. 7, pp. 1–122.
 21. Francis Martens, ‘Éloge de la grimace’, in *La séduction*, ed. by Maurice Olender and Jacques Sojcher, Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1980, pp. 25–34 (p. 29). My translation from the original French: ‘*C’est ainsi que la séduction, le miroir et le masque ont aussi fonction de vérité et de dévoilement*’.
 22. The full title in English is *Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The illuminating gas*. In French, *Étant donnés: 1° La chute d’eau, 2° Le gaz d’éclairage*. The work is on permanent display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, from which it cannot be moved.
 23. Lorenzo Chiesa, ‘Lacan and Philosophy: Between Realism and Materialism’, *Jacques Lacan Today* conference, The Psychoanalysis Unit, University College London, 8–9 May 2010.24. Jacob A. Arlow, ‘Trauma and Pathogenesis’, in *The Seduction Theory in its Second Century: Trauma, Fantasy and Reality Today*, ed. by Michael Good, Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 2006, pp. 117–128 (p. 126).
 24. Alain Vanier, ‘Lacan’s Object’, *Jacques Lacan Today* conference, The Psychoanalysis Unit, University College London, 8–9 May 2010.
 25. Sigmund Freud (1950), Letter 52, ‘Extracts from the Fliess Papers’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and tr. by James Strachey and others, London: Vintage, 2001, vol. 1, pp. 173–280 (pp. 238–239).
 26. Freud, Letter 69, *Fliess Papers*, pp. 259–260.
 27. Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 60.
 28. Jacques Lacan (1973), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, tr. by Alan Sheridan, New York: W.W. Norton, 1981, p. 185. The text continues: ‘it is not the object that is the support of desire’. In the next page, he elaborates: ‘But the object of desire, in the usual sense, is either a phantasy that is in reality the support of desire, or a lure’.
 29. Jacques Lacan (1966) ‘The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power’, in *Écrits, The First Complete Edition in English*, tr. by Bruce Fink, New York, London: W.W. Norton, 2006, pp. 489–542 (p. 532).
 30. Jacques Lacan (1966) ‘The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire’, in *Écrits, The First Complete Edition in English*, tr. by Bruce Fink, New York, London: W.W. Norton, 2006, pp. 671–702 (p. 691).
 31. Evans, *Introductory Dictionary*; p. 61.
 32. My translation. In French: ‘*La collusion entre les desirs du sujet et le séducteur fait que le don offert devient contraignant et que le sujet séduit se soumet à la volonté du séducteur. Ce que le déguisement diabolique cache au fond, c’est qu’en dernière instance le don est don de rien. Car le diable séducteur ne se donne pas lui-même. Il possède. Il n’entre pas dans un système d’échange, mais il ne donne que certaines choses en échange pour le don total du sujet séduit lui-même.*’ Antoine Vergote, ‘*Charmes divins et déguisements diaboliques*’, in *La séduction*, ed. by Maurice Olender and Jacques Sojcher, Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1980, pp. 77–84 (p. 80).
 33. Maurice Olender and Jacques Sojcher (eds), ‘Préface’, *La séduction*, Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1980, p. 7. Translated by the author from the French: ‘*le concept ici y laisserai de ses plumes [...] la séduction ainsi aurait le dernier mot*’.