

Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007)

By Douglas Kellner

On March 6, 2007 Jean Baudrillard died in Paris at the age of 77 after a long fight with cancer. Associated with postmodern and poststructuralist theory, Baudrillard is difficult to situate in relation to traditional and contemporary philosophy.¹ His work combines philosophy, social theory, and an idiosyncratic cultural metaphysics that reflects on key events of phenomena of the epoch. A sharp critic of contemporary society, culture, and thought, Baudrillard is often seen as a major guru of French postmodern theory, although he can also be read as a thinker who combines theory and social and cultural criticism in original and provocative ways and a writer who has developed his own style and forms of writing. He is an extremely prolific author who published over fifty books and commented on some of the most salient cultural and sociological phenomena of the contemporary era, including the erasure of the distinctions of gender, race, and class that structured modern societies in a new postmodern consumer, media, and high tech society; the mutating roles of art and aesthetics; fundamental changes in politics, culture, and human beings; and the impact of new media, information, and cybernetic

technologies in the creation of a qualitatively different social order, providing fundamental mutations of human and social life.

For some years a cult figure of postmodern theory, Baudrillard moved beyond the discourse of the postmodern from the early 1980s to the present, and developed a highly idiosyncratic mode of philosophical and cultural analysis that could be described as a post-poststructuralist mode of thought, although Baudrillard's theorizing is hard to categorize and pin down and often undergoes surprising mutations. Of postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers, he has consistently gone his own way and avoided fads and intellectual turns of the moment. In retrospect, he emerges from within the perspective of contemporary theory as one of the most radical post-poststructuralist thinkers who undermines key categories of Western philosophy and contemporary theory.

Baudrillard was born in the cathedral town of Reims, France in 1929. He told interviewers that his grandparents were peasants and his parents became civil servants. He also claims that he was the first member of his family to pursue an advanced education and that this led to a rupture with his parents and cultural milieu. In 1956, he began

working as a professor of secondary education in a French high school (Lyceé) and in the early 1960s did editorial work for the French publisher Seuil. Baudrillard was initially a Germanist who published essays on literature in Les temps modernes in 1962-1963 and translated works of Peter Weiss and Bertolt Brecht into French, as well as a book on messianic revolutionary movements by Wilhelm Mühlmann. During this period, he met Henri Lefebvre, whose critiques of everyday life impressed him, and Roland Barthes, whose semiological analyses of contemporary society had lasting influence on his work.

In 1966, Baudrillard entered the University of Paris, Nanterre, and became Lefebvre's assistant, while studying languages, philosophy, sociology, and other disciplines. He defended his "These de Troisième Cycle" in sociology at Nanterre in 1966 with a dissertation on "Le système des objects," and began teaching sociology in October of that year. Opposing French and U.S. intervention in the Algerian and Vietnamese wars, Baudrillard associated himself with the French Left in the 1960s. Nanterre was the center of radical politics and the "March 22 movement," associated with Daniel Cohn-Bendit and the enrageés, began in the Nanterre sociology department. Baudrillard said later that

he was involved in the events of May 1968 which resulted in massive student uprisings and a general strike that almost drove de Gaulle from power.

During the late 1960s, Baudrillard began publishing a series of books that would eventually make him world famous. Influenced by Lefebvre, Barthes, Georges Bataille, and the French situationists, Baudrillard undertook serious work in the field of social theory, semiology, and psychoanalysis in the 1960s and published his first book The System of Objects in 1968 (1996), followed by a book on The Consumer Society in 1970 (1998), and For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign in 1972 (1981). These early publications are attempts, within the framework of critical sociology, to combine the studies of everyday life initiated by Lefebvre and Debord and the situationists with a social semiology that studies the life of signs in social life. This project, influenced by Barthes, centers on the system of objects in the consumer society (the focus of his first two books), and the interface between political economy and semiotics (the nucleus of his third book).

Baudrillard's early work was one of the first to appropriate semiology to analyze how objects are encoded with a system of signs and meanings that constitute

contemporary media and consumer societies. Combining semiological studies, Marxian political economy, and sociology of the consumer society, Baudrillard began his life-long task of exploring the system of objects and signs which forms our everyday life.

Baudrillard distanced himself from with Marxism in The Mirror of Production (1975 [1973]) where he argues that Marxism, first, does not adequately illuminate premodern societies which were organized around symbolic exchange and not production. He also argues that Marxism does not radically enough critique capitalist societies and calls for a more extreme break. At this stage, Baudrillard turns to anthropological perspectives on premodern societies for hints of more emancipatory alternatives. Yet it is important to note that this critique of Marxism was taken from the Left, arguing that Marxism did not provide a radical enough critique of, or alternative to, contemporary productivist societies, capitalist and communist. Baudrillard concluded that French communist failure to support the May 68 movements was rooted in part in a conservatism that had roots in Marxism itself. Hence, Baudrillard and others of his generation began searching for more radical critical positions.

His next book Symbolic Exchange and Death (1993 [1976]) attempts to provide ultraradical perspectives that overcome the limitations of an economistic Marxist tradition. This ultra-leftist phase of Baudrillard's itinerary would be short-lived, however, though in Symbolic Exchange and Death, Baudrillard produces one of his most important and dramatic provocations. In this text, Baudrillard posits a divide in history as radical as the rupture between premodern symbolic societies and modern capitalism. In the mode of classical social theory, he systematically develops distinctions between premodern societies organized around symbolic exchange, modern societies organized around production, and postmodern societies organized around simulation.

Against the organizing principles of modern and postmodern society, Baudrillard valorizes the logic of symbolic exchange, as an alternative organizing principle of society. Against modern demands to produce value and meaning, Baudrillard calls for their extermination and annihilation, providing as examples, Mauss's gift-exchange, Saussure's anagrams, and Freud's concept of the death drive. In all of these instances, there is a rupture with the logic of exchange (of goods, meanings, and libidinal

energies) and thus an escape from the logic of production, capitalism, rationality, and meaning. Baudrillard's paradoxical logic of symbolic exchange can be explained as expression of a desire to liberate himself from modern positions and to seek a revolutionary position outside of modern society. Against modern values, Baudrillard advocates their annihilation and extermination.

Symbolic Exchange and Death and the succeeding studies in Simulation and Simulacra (1994 [1981]) articulate the principle of a fundamental rupture between modern and postmodern societies and mark Baudrillard's departure from the problematic of modern social theory. For Baudrillard, modern societies are organized around the production and consumption of commodities, while postmodern societies are organized around simulation and the play of images and signs, denoting a situation in which codes, models, and signs are the organizing principles of a new social order where simulation rules. In the society of simulation, identities are constructed by the appropriation of images, and codes and models determine how individuals perceive themselves and relate to other people. Economics, politics, social life, and culture are all governed by the logic of simulation, whereby codes and models determine how goods

are consumed and used, politics unfold, culture is produced and consumed, and everyday life is lived.

Baudrillard's thought from the mid-1970s to the present revolves in its own theoretical orbit and provides a set of challenging provocations to modern theory. During the 1980s, Baudrillard's major works of the 1970s were translated into many languages and each new book of the 1980s was in turn translated into English and other major languages in short order. Consequently, he became world-renown as one of the master thinkers of postmodernity, one of the major avatars of the postmodern turn. Hence, he became something of an academic celebrity, traveling around the world promoting his work and winning a significant following, though more outside of the field of academic sociology or philosophy than within any particular discipline.

At the same time that his work was becoming extremely popular, Baudrillard's own writing became increasingly difficult and occasionally hermetic. Baudrillard's new metaphysical speculations are evident in Fatal Strategies (1983, translated in 1990), another turning point in his itinerary. This text presented a bizarre metaphysical scenario concerning the triumph of objects over subjects

within the "obscene" proliferation of an object world so completely out of control that it surpasses all attempts to understand, conceptualize and control it. His scenario concerns the proliferation and growing supremacy of objects over subjects and the eventual triumph of the object. In a discussion of "Ecstasy and Inertia," Baudrillard discusses how objects and events in contemporary society are continually surpassing themselves, growing and expanding in power. The "ecstasy" of objects is their proliferation and expansion to the Nth degree, to the superlative; ecstasy as going outside of or beyond oneself: the beautiful as more beautiful than beautiful in fashion, the real more real than the real in television, sex more sexual than sex in pornography. Ecstasy is thus the form of obscenity (fully explicit, nothing hidden) and of the hyperreality described by Baudrillard earlier taken to a higher level, redoubled and intensified. His vision of contemporary society exhibits a careening of growth and excrescence (croissance et excroissance), expanding and excreting ever more goods, services, information, messages or demands -- surpassing all rational ends and boundaries in a spiral of uncontrolled growth and replication.

Yet growth, acceleration, and proliferation have reached such extremes, Baudrillard suggests, that the ecstasy of excrescence is accompanied by inertia. For as the society is saturated to the limit, it implodes and winds down into entropy. This process presents a catastrophe for the subject, for not only does the acceleration and proliferation of the object world intensify the aleatory dimension of chance and non-determinacy, but the objects themselves take over in a "cool" catastrophe for the exhausted subject, whose fascination with the play of objects turns to apathy, stupefaction, and an entropic inertia.

In retrospect, the growing power of the world of objects over the subject has been Baudrillard's theme from the beginning, thus pointing to an underlying continuity in his project. In his early writings, he explored the ways that commodities were fascinating individuals in the consumer society and the ways that the world of goods was assuming new and more value through the agency of sign value and the code -- which were part of the world of things, the system of objects. His polemics against Marxism were fuelled by the belief that sign value and the code were more fundamental than such traditional elements of

political economy as exchange value, use value, production and so on in constituting contemporary society. Then, reflections on the media entered the forefront of his thought: the TV object was at the center of the home in Baudrillard's earlier thinking and the media, simulations, hyperreality, and implosion eventually came to obliterate distinctions between private and public, inside and outside, media and reality. Henceforth, everything was public, transparent, ec-static and hyperreal in the object world which was gaining in fascination and seductiveness as the years went by.

And so ultimately the subject, the darling of modern philosophy, is defeated in Baudrillard's metaphysical scenario and the object triumphs, a stunning end to the dialectic of subject and object which had been the framework of modern philosophy. The object is thus the subject's fatality and Baudrillard's "fatal strategies" project a paradoxical call to submit to the strategies and ruses of objects.

In The Fatal Strategies and succeeding writings, Baudrillard seems to be taking his unique form of theory into the realm of metaphysics, but it is a specific type of metaphysics deeply inspired by the pataphysics developed by

Alfred Jarry. Like Jarry's pataphysics, Baudrillard's universe is ruled by surprise, reversal, hallucination, blasphemy, obscenity, and a desire to shock and outrage. Thus, in view of the growing supremacy of the object, Baudrillard wants us to abandon the subject and to side with the object. Pataphysics aside, it seems that Baudrillard is trying to end the philosophy of subjectivity that has controlled French thought since Descartes by going over completely to the other side. Descartes' malin genie, his evil genius, was a ruse of the subject which tried to seduce him into accepting what was not clear and distinct, but over which he was ultimately able to prevail. Baudrillard's "evil genius" is the object itself which is much more malign than the merely epistemological deceptions of the subject faced by Descartes and which constitutes a fatal destiny that demands the end of the philosophy of subjectivity. Henceforth, for Baudrillard, we live in the era of the reign of the object.

Throughout his life Nietzsche was a major influence,² and especially in the last decades of his work, Nietzschean motifs, modes of thought, and writing practices increasingly informed his work. Baudrillard became increasingly radical and "un-contemporary," standing alone

against current trends and fashions, in a fiercely individualistic mode of thought. Nietzschean categories like fate, reversal, uncertainty, and an aristocratic assault on conventional wisdom began to shape his writings, that often, a la Nietzsche, took the form of aphorisms or short essays.

In the 1980s, Baudrillard posited an "immanent reversal," a reversal of direction and meaning, in which things turn into their opposite. Thus, the society of production was passing over to simulation and seduction; the panoptic and repressive power theorized by Foucault was turning into a cynical and seductive power; the liberation championed in the 1960s was become a form of voluntary servitude; sovereignty had passed from the side of the subject to the object; and revolution and emancipation had turned into their opposites, snaring one more and more in the logic of the system, thus trapping individuals in an order of simulation and virtuality. His concept of "immanent reversal" also provides a perverse form of Horkheimer and Adorno's dialectic of Enlightenment (1972 [1947]), where everything becomes its opposite, -- where Enlightenment becomes domination, where culture becomes culture industry, where democracy becomes a form of mass

manipulation, and science and technology part of an apparatus of domination.

Baudrillard follows this logic into the 1990s where his thought becomes ever more hermetic, metaphysical, and idiosyncratic. During this period, Baudrillard continued playing the role of academic and media superstar, traveling around the world lecturing and performing in academic and cultural events. Some of his experiences are captured in travelogue America (1988) and collections of aphorisms, Cool Memories (1990) and Cool Memories II (1996), that combine reflections on his travels and experiences with development of his ideas and perceptions. Retiring from the University of Nanterre in 1987, Baudrillard subsequently functioned as an independent intellectual, dedicating himself to caustic reflections on our contemporary moment and his metaphysical ruminations.

During the 1990s and upon until his death, Baudrillard continued to write short journal entries and by 2007 had published five volumes of his Cool Memories. He produced as well reflections on contemporary issues like the Gulf War, the September 11 terror attacks, that he saw as the only real "event" of the past decades, globalization, the US invasion of Iraq, and other occurrences of the day.³

Baudrillard also continued his metaphysical speculations in works such as The Transparency of Evil (1993 [1990]) The Illusion of the End (1994b [1992]), The Perfect Crime (1996b [1995]), Impossible Exchange (2001 [1999]), The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact (2005), and The Conspiracy of Art (2005).

Baudrillard has never been as influential in France as in the English-speaking world and elsewhere -- a point made in many French obituaries and blogs upon his death. Baudrillard is an example of the "global popular," a thinker who has followers and readers throughout the world, though, so far, no Baudrillardian school has emerged.⁴ His influence has been largely at the margins of a diverse number of disciplines ranging from social theory to philosophy to art history, thus it is difficult to gauge his impact on the mainstream of philosophy, or any specific academic discipline.

Baudrillard is perhaps most important as part of the postmodern turn against modernity and its academic disciplines. Baudrillard's work cuts across the disciplines and promotes cross-disciplinary thought. He challenges standard wisdom and puts in question received dogma and methods. While his early work on the consumer society, the

political economy of the sign, simulation and simulacra, and the implosion of phenomena previously separated can be deployed within critical theory, much of his post-1980s work quite self-consciously goes beyond the classical tradition.

Baudrillard thus emerges as a transdisciplinary theorist of the fin-de-millennium, a critical radical of modernity and modern theory, and a harbinger of an emergent (post-)postmodern mode of thought and discourse. In the final analysis, Baudrillard is perhaps most useful as a provocateur who challenges and puts in question the tradition of classical social theory and philosophy, and standard academic disciplines and procedures. He claims that the object of classical theory -- modernity -- has been surpassed by a novel social situation, called "postmodernity" by some, and that therefore new theoretical strategies, modes of writing, and forms of theory are necessary.

Baudrillard thus ultimately goes beyond conventional philosophy and theory altogether into his own theoretical sphere and mode of writing that provides occasionally biting insights into contemporary social phenomena and provocative critiques of contemporary and classical

thought. He now appears in retrospect as a completely idiosyncratic thinker who went his own way and developed his own mode of writing and thought. Baudrillard had a good, long run, and we will miss his acerbic irony, provocations, and challenges to contemporary thought and discourse.

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Notes

¹ For a fuller explication of Baudrillard's relation to philosophy see my entry on Baudrillard in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/baudrillard/>, and the more extended version published as "Jean Baudrillard After Modernity: Provocations On A Provocateur and Challenger," International Journal of Baudrillard Studies, Volume 3, Number 1 (January 2006) at http://www.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol3_1/kellner.htm. For the first book published on Baudrillard and an overview of early stages of his work, see Douglas Kellner, Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Post-Modernism and Beyond. Cambridge, UK and Palo Alto, Cal.: Polity Press and Stanford University Press, 1989.

² See Arthur Kroker, "The Spirit of Jean Baudrillard: In Memoriam: 1929-2007". C-Theory (posted March 8, 2007) at <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=573.htm>.

³ On this work, see my "Baudrillard, Globalization and Terrorism: Some Comments on Recent Adventures of the Image and Spectacle on the Occasion of Baudrillard's 75th Birthday," International Journal of Baudrillard Studies, Volume 2, Number 1 (January 2005) at http://www.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol2_1/kellner.htm.

⁴ There is, however, an excellent Internet journal edited by Gerry Coulter, International Journal of Baudrillard Studies at <http://www.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/index.html>.