

Entry on Jean Baudrillard by Douglas Kellner (<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/>)

Baudrillard, Jean (1929) was born in the cathedral town of Reims, France. His grandparents were peasants, his parents became civil servants, and he was the first member of his family to pursue an advanced education. 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. Trained as a Germanist, Baudrillard translated Germany literary works including Brecht and Peter Weiss, although he turned to the study of sociology and for some decades was a sociology professor at Nanterre.

Baudrillard became renowned for his theorizations of developments in contemporary society, including the trajectories of the consumer society, media and technology, cyberspace and the information society, and biotechnology. He claimed that cumulatively these forces had produced a postmodern rupture with modern culture and society. While modern societies for Baudrillard were organized around production and political economy, postmodern societies were organized around technology and generated new forms of culture, experience and subjectivities.

Baudrillard's work is extremely hard to categorize as he combines social theory, cultural and political commentary, philosophy, and literary stylistics in his work, crossing boundaries between academic disciplines and fields. Yet in an interview in Forget Foucault (1987) he confessed: "Well, let's be frank here. If I ever dabbled in anything in my theoretical infancy, it was philosophy more than sociology. I don't think at all in those terms. My point of view is completely metaphysical. If anything, I'm a metaphysician, perhaps a moralist, but certainly not a sociologist. The only 'sociological' work I can claim is my effort to put an end to the social, to the concept of the social."

Indeed, beginning in the 1980s, more philosophical themes emerged in his work although in a highly ironical and paradoxical form. Baudrillard's proliferating metaphysical speculations are evident in Fatal Strategies (1990), which can be seen as a turning to a sort of idiosyncratic philosophical musings. 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.

For Baudrillard, the subject, the darling of modern philosophy, is defeated in his metaphysical scenario and the object triumphs, a stunning end to the dialectic of subject and object that had been the framework of modern philosophy. The object is thus the subject's "fatality" and Baudrillard's "fatal strategies" project an obscure call to submit to the strategies and ruses of objects. In "banal strategies," "the subject believes itself to always be more clever than the object, whereas in the other [fatal strategies] the object is always supposed to be more shrewd, more cynical, more brilliant than the subject" (1990: 259-260). Previously, in banal strategies, the subject believed itself to be more masterful and sovereign than the object. A fatal strategy, by contrast, recognizes the supremacy of the object and therefore takes the side of the object and surrenders to its strategies, ruses and rules.

In The Fatal Strategies and succeeding writings, Baudrillard seems to be taking theory into the realm of metaphysics, but it is a specific type of metaphysics deeply inspired by the pataphysics developed by Alfred Jarry in “What is Pataphysics” as “the science of the realm beyond metaphysics.... It will study the laws which govern exceptions and will explain the universe supplementary to this one; or, less ambitiously, it will describe a universe which one can see -- must see perhaps -- instead of the traditional one....”.

Like the universe in Jarry's play Ubu Roi, The Gestures and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, and other literary texts, Baudrillard's is a totally absurd universe where objects rule in mysterious ways, and people and events are governed by absurd and ultimately unknowable interconnections and predestination (The French playwright Eugene Ionesco is another good source of entry to this universe). 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 recommends abandoning the subject and siding 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 to the other side. Descartes' malin genie, his evil genius, was a ruse of the subject that 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 that 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.

Examples of the paradoxical and ironic style of Baudrillard's philosophical musings abound in The Perfect Crime (1996). Baudrillard claims that the negation of a higher and transcendent reality in the current media and technological society is a “perfect crime” which involves the destruction of the real. In a world of appearance, image, and illusion, Baudrillard suggests, reality disappears although its traces continue to nourish an illusion of the real. Driven toward virtualization in a hi-tech society, all the imperfections of human life and the world are eliminated in virtual reality, but this is the elimination of reality itself, the Perfect Crime. This “post-critical” and “catastrophic” state of affairs render our previous conceptual world irrelevant, Baudrillard suggests, urging criticism to turn ironic and transform the demise of the real into an art form.

Obviously, Baudrillard has entered a world of thought far from academic philosophy, one that puts in question traditional modes of thought and discourse. His search for new philosophical perspectives has won him a loyal global audience, but also criticism for his excessive irony, word play, and philosophical games. Yet his work stands as a provocation to traditional and contemporary philosophy that challenges thinkers to address old philosophical problems like truth and reality in new ways in the contemporary world.

Works by Baudrillard

Simulations. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.

Forgetting Foucault. New York: Semiotext(e), 1987.

Fatal Strategies. New York: Semiotext(e), 1990.
Symbolic Exchange and Death. London: Sage, 1993.
The Perfect Crime. London. Verso, 1996.

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Genosko, Gary (1994) Baudrillard and Signs. London: Routledge.
Kellner, Douglas (1989). Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond.
Cambridge and Palo Alto: Polity Press and Stanford University Press.
_____ (1994), editor Jean Baudrillard. A Critical Reader. Oxford: Basil
Blackwell.