

Introduction

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Ten years on from the death of the sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard, the legacy of his thinking continues to bear fruit. It could almost be said that absence has bestowed even more generous gifts than presence. After all, death often played a dominant role in Baudrillard's intellectual outlook. As the world advances into postmodernity, or whatever it will be called when it has been fully grasped, the perspectives in his works have become not only more valuable but also much clearer. For instance, the concept of simulacra, which is mapped out on an ever-increasing basis in technology, communication and everyday life, increasingly features as a cornerstone of meaningful interpretations of phenomenology. When applied to the sociological and cultural analysis of the current situation, it offers unexpected connections that become obvious when illustrated by analytical thinking, thereby building a comprehensive schema that gradually reveals the pattern beneath the apparent chaos of the changes, beneath the constant interplay of mirroring that seems to distance us from reality and plummet towards disaster. We are only just beginning to understand Baudrillard's conceptual legacy and employ the full richness and depth of its macro-analytical scope. Frequent incursions into the world of media and communications – with immediate repercussions on the academic world –

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have probably overshadowed the more systemic and profound contribution of his thinking, which targeted the general flow of society and its material incarnations, focusing on how and why change took shape in one form rather than the numerous other possibilities. What is the common denominator between shopping centres and outlet stores, the LGBT movement, industrial design and modern architecture? There is a sense of uniformity – we could almost say entanglement – between seemingly distant phenomena, but how can it be established, defined and understood using the tools of scientific analysis rather than just intuition? This is what Baudrillard's legacy consists of: he showed us the relationship between society, culture and form, and provided us with the instruments to study it. Furthermore, he indicated which evolutionary synthesis now features this relationship, as well as providing tools to understand how and why the relationship produced different evolutionary syntheses in the past in the succession of historical and social formations over time, especially in Western technological societies.

In his visionary writings, often surreal both in content and style, Baudrillard offers cold and detached analysis of the postmodern world without ever falling into despair and annihilation. Through his ironic, almost cynical scrutiny, he has taught us to see reality beyond reality; his theories have made us aware of the collapse of the barrier between the real and the unreal, which is one of the biggest socio-anthropological changes in the schism that is still called postmodernity pending full understanding. The virtual hyperconnected world has established a continuum between the real and the unreal; we are now used to moving smoothly and naturally between the real and tangible world and the unreal but real world of telematic networks and virtual realities. The result is a unicum of life and subjective perception which forms an integral part of a new 'natural' hyperreality blending the real and the unreal into a single world. Although it might seem ostensibly meaningless to ask whether the unreal has become real or the real has become unreal, the question is valid and can be answered once again using the concept of simulacra.

A second major conceptual breakthrough among Baudrillard's many achievements concerns the discipline that interests us most: the sociology of consumption. His critique of the concept of value in use and application of the game of signs to consumer society contributed to the significant change in perspective in studies in the field, enabling a unified vision of the processes of change in society in general, with particular reference to the phenomenology of the postmodern transition.

As the processes of social change and the unfolding of the postmodern transition reveal new phenomena and help clarify the overall shift we are experiencing, along with its potential points of arrival, Baudrillard's insights –

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the solutions that still lie dormant in his thinking – will undoubtedly become even clearer and more valuable to us, transforming surreal visions into an understanding of the real.

Thank you professor!

Domenico Secondulfo and Debora Viviani
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