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Jean Baudrillard: cynism or truth?

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Baudrillard: a journey through his works

Jean Baudrillard was one of the leading intellectuals of the twentieth century.

Baudrillard, who died on 6th March 2007 in Paris, conceived an acute observation and, on many occasions, complex, ambiguous and difficult interpretation of contemporary society for him (and us). Reassessing the observations that revolve around the French philosophy's simulacra concept during the 1960's¹, Baudrillard focused his attention on the relationship which is established between this concept and the vast, symbolic horizon produced by the simulative condition present in society.

Considered as being the father of the simulacra concept and according to this author, post-modern society is differentiated from the previous period, the modern age, because of its being organised in compliance with a new, simulation logic and on the continuous interchange of images and signs. Differently, in fact, from modern society, which was structured according to the linear and precise production logic; current society is based on the proliferation of codes, models and signs and the new rules dictated by simulation.

Some, important thematic nucleuses and perspectives emerged from his analysis and shall be expanded upon below.

1. Illusion

1.1 The value – sign

Baudrillard penetrated into a reality, which is like simulation, dominated by the sign, emptiness and nothingness, with the supremacy of bodies as appearance. Society is a game of appearances and signs, which creates artfulness and illusion, through a journey, which likens it to magic and make-believe.

Baudrillard's analysis begins with an observation on the birth and development of consumption, as being an important, social language (*Le Système des Objets*, 1968), like something that pushes the continuous birth and growth of individual desires, in a never-ending vortex. Baudrillard studied how individuals perceived and consumed objects, according to a new language created by the consumer goods, themselves.

In his observations, he classified objects into three different systems.

1. The functional system that includes things with a univocal and immovable purpose, which includes furnishing. In fact, in the case of furnishings, items of furniture are set out according to strict directives, each item is placed in a precise position and defined on the basis of the human relations symbolising it.

¹ See the works of Pierre Klossowski and Gilles Deleuze (Viviani, 2008).

2. The marginal or non-functional system, containing collection, design and antique items. The latter is a system in which consumer goods stop being exclusively tangible goods, but represent a mental space, with a value established by the relationship of this object with the individual himself.

3. The meta and dysfunctional system, which includes gadgets and robots. In this case, the function of the object is concluded through the automatism, which defines its degree of perfection. This system represents the object's dreamt personalisation: the most beautiful object to imitate.

This perspective focuses attention on the objects' sphere of relations, consumer goods, which represent a coherent system of signs, which weakens, little by little, the material nature of primary needs. The new opaqueness of production and consumption social relations is thus materialised in the goods that, due to this reason, may become a sign.

Accusing Marxism of placing production at the heart of social analysis and, in this way, not fully reflecting middle-class society (*Le miroir de la production*, 1973; *Oublier Foucault*, 1977), Baudrillard introduced the value-sign, which takes the place of use value and exchange value (*Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, 1972; *Le miroir de la production*, 1973). As occurs in the present-giving system, the exchange object has now a value that is removed from its functional matrix and exchange value, but which is established by the object's symbolic value. In relation to the gift, in which its value is established by the relationship between the individuals, in the consumer society, the good's value is the result of the individual's relationship with the object and the object with all the other objects.

In the setting outlined, the value of consumer goods is derived from the differential relationship of this object compared to other ones. The goods, in their capacity of the corpus of signs, thus, create a generalised system of exchanges and the production of coded values, which are interconnected and interest all consumers. Thus, consumption ceases to be a simple, individual activity and becomes the systematic manipulation of signs in which the consumer has an active role, not just with the consumer goods, but also with the entire community (*La société de consommation. Ses mythes, ses structures*, 1974).

1.2 Simulacra: the death of the original

In his concept of the third order of simulacra² (*L'échange symbolique et la mort*, 1976), Baudrillard sustained that the problem of mankind is no so much intercourse in a society made up of copies, but that the true uncertainty is due to the fact that these copies conceal nothingness, because they assimilate and kill the original one, the True One (*L'échange symbolique et la mort*, 1976; *Oublier Foucault*, 1977).

The first order simulacra has been conceived from the process forging the original, which, through the logic of similarity, aims at recreating a figurative likeness with the original model, thus, creating a false copy of the same.

Even in the second order, the original point of reference endures, which permits reproduction but, in this case, it is cancelled in the material and aesthetic homogeneity with the objects reproduced, which become simulacra, unable to be defined one from another.

The introduction of third order simulacra ends the objects original point of reference connection and creates a passage from the signs that conceal "something", to the simulacra that, instead, indicate that nothing exists anymore. It is, in fact, this death of the original point of reference that represented the novelty of Baudrillard's line of thought and his analysis of contemporary society.

Simulation does not lead only to the elimination of all points of reference, but, above all, to their resurrection as an artificial system of signs.

² The historical-social evolution, defined by Baudrillard as being the *simulacra precession*, was developed around three orders of simulacra, each of which was the fruit of the different kind of logic that characterised three, specific moments in history: counterfeiting, from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution; production, traditional to the industrial era and simulation, which characterises post-modern society (*L'échange symbolique et la mort*, 1976).

The simulacra trilogy order corresponds to three, different, value orders, submitted by Baudrillard in his analysis of the consumer society:

<i>Period</i>	<i>Order value</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Simulacra</i>	<i>Logic</i>
Renaissance	natural	use	1st order	counterfeiting
Industrial era	mercantile	exchange	2nd order	reproduction
Post-Industrial era	structural	sign	3rd order	simulation

Viviani D. (2008), *Simulacro. Una ipotesi di lettura della postmodernità*, QuiEdit, Verona

Just as the third value order, which connotes our current society, transforms goods into a sign, with the most general perspective of the simulacra, the third order transforms what is real, which undergoes the mortification of its disappearance, thwarted through simulation and reproducing itself as a sign. All the signs become elements of reciprocal and continuous, interchangeable relations without, however, the ability of being exchanged with something real.

2. Hyperreality

2.1 Communication: the perfect crime

The simulacra question, implied as a copy that replaces the original, became the central theme in the analysis of the cynical power of the media. In our society, messages, images and information follow each other endlessly, without solution of continuity; they kill what is real and exterminate the illusion. A crime is committed, the perfect crime, because things disappear and are replaced by their simulations, without any reason, killer and victim (*Le crime parfait*, 1995). Through the use of new technology, the dominant model of reality is eroded and virtual reality replaces the real one. Thus, the universe results as having been purified through a “perfect formula”.

Everything can be achieved in virtual reality, by creating things which, in reality, are in opposition, everything is absorbed in order to be “hyper-implemented once again”. Reality continues to live under the effect of simulation, like fiction, in a kind of reality that has been purified from any kind of imperfection and limits, to become realer than real: hyperreality (*L’illusion de la fin*, 1992; *Le crime parfait*, 1995).

In one of Baudrillard’s works, this hyper-reality takes shape: in the form of the United States of America (*Amérique*, 1986).

With a continuous comparison being made to the surrounding desert and with Europe and the rest of the World, Baudrillard described the true essence of America. Baudrillard, through a travelling diary, undertook, in reality, a journey in the perceptive space of hyperreality, entering into the object under observation.

According to our Author, America represents hyperreality with its sanitised garbage and well-oiled traffic; it is characterised by a certain liquidity of life, signs and messages, bodies and automobiles. Undisputed and mythical power, which moves throughout the entire world imposing itself with the fluid quality of advertising; America is the bastion, the objective, the aim and the dream.

Everything has been achieved here but, when everything has been completed and obtained, the true interrogative arises. In its depths, the nightmare of the senses emerges, the interrogative of the future looms. When freedom, wellbeing, the stereotypes of life and death, are no longer objective, but represent reality, then, there is no reason to stop. It is for this reason that America became the civilisation of the eternal race (*Amérique*, 1986).

2.2 Art, or rather, the processing of image mourning

From Baudrillard’s point of view, the frontier between fiction and reality is less clear, less easy to identify, with the consequent difficulty in interpreting and distinguishing a real event and its

implementation. Through the virtual world, we have entered a new age in which the idea itself of representation has gone into a state of crisis; the idea that mankind has of itself and the world. In post-modern, mass media and consumer society, everything becomes an image, a sign, a show, a trans-aesthetic object – in the same measure in which everything also becomes trans-economic, trans-political and trans-sexual.

If ours is a world characterised by nothingness, by the emptiness simulated by the simulacra, what can be represented?

If everything is characterised by the emptiness of the image, art, the world of representation, in its representation of the world, it cannot but emphasise this emptiness. According to Baudrillard, art attempts to rotate around the emptiness of the image, the object, which is no longer such. It is a “re-creator” illusion, realistic, camouflaged, hologramatic, which puts an end to the game of illusion by means of the perfection of reproduction, the virtual remake of reality (*Illusion, désillusion esthétiques*, 1997).

This “materialization of aesthetics” is accompanied by a desperate attempt to simulate art, to reproduce and combine previous, artistic forms and styles and create still more numerous artistic images and objects. But this form of eclecticism, which is confused and ambiguous in form and pleasure, generates a situation in which art is no longer art, in its traditional or modern sense, but is a mere image, artefact, object, simulation or product.

According to Baudrillard, Warhol’s work, for example, reintroduces nothing into the heart of the image and turns this emptiness into an event; it represents substance, or better, non-substance. It is total artificialness, aware that the world is no longer the natural world, but it is now a world without any images, without the imagination.

Art rotates around disillusion and commercial frenzy. Every banality becomes an aesthetic banality; it creates and lives of an orgy of representation, in the attempt to infringe the secret inherent in a desire and an object, in an attempt to make everything clear and visible (*Le complot de l’art*, 1997).

3. Mankind seduced

The observation on the birth of the simulacra and the nature that characterises the first works is now postponed to analysis of the force of the object to insert the subject in an ambiguous and continuous game of disappearance, appearance and make-believe (*L’autre par lui-même*, 1987).

Frenzy and the constant proliferation of these copies is added to this emptiness, which deceive mankind, absorbing him in a constant search for the truth, they show him what he would like to see, always and continually, but they do not let him see anything.

In the work *De la séduction* (1979) Baudrillard once again undertook the dynamics concerning the exchange of codes and symbols introduced into the previous works and underlined the new seductive and deceitful strategies implemented by the third order simulacra. The seduction simulacra distances mankind ever further from the truth, through a continuous and uninterrupted ritual exchange. It is a game with its own appealing, enticing and deceitful rules. Seduction is no longer on the same level as desire, it has no binding capacity, but it puts it continually into play.

In this work, Baudrillard identified two, different kinds of seduction.

Disillusioned simulation, identified by pornography, which pierces any imagination with its mortal super-evidence. The object, in this case, can be seen too close up, you can see what you have not seen before and this consumes it.

Enchanted simulation, instead, «*trompe-l’oeil*», is falsier than false, it is the secret of appearance. In this case, there is no confusion with reality, but production of a simulacra, fully aware of the game and its artificiality, by means of an excess of the appearance of what is real.

Seduction is everywhere, it is omnipresent, glacial; if a simulacra recalls nothingness, seduction that is implemented by objects is a hallucination of desire, because it pushes the subject towards a groundless dream, it creates new and unjustified needs for consumers (*De la séduction*, 1979). According to the logic of desire, it was the subject who had absolute power but now, with the introduction of the logic of seduction, the situation is overturned: the object seduces and provokes, it establishes and governs the desire of the individual himself. In fact, up until now, the object-

subject relationship was characterised by those that Baudrillard defined as being “banal strategies”, from dynamics in which the subject appeared to be independent and more capable compared to the object. Now each of us finds ourselves trapped in fatal strategies implemented by the object which seduces and deceives mankind continuously, continually exceeding itself and expanding its own power (*Les Stratégies fatales*, 1983).

At this point, Baudrillard added a new value order, the fourth one, the fractal order, defined as being the value irradiated order, according to which there is no longer any likeness with the original points of reference, whether these points of reference are real, equivalent copies or codes, but the value irradiates everywhere, without any point of reference whatsoever. The success of communications, the continuous proliferation of information and the excess of knowledge is dispersed indifferently over the surface in all directions, but it does nothing but commute. Messages, images and information follow on endlessly, without any solution of continuity, kill reality and exterminate the illusion (*La Transparence du Mal*, 1990).

If we imagine reality in a “face to face” relationship, today this relationship does not exist any longer. There is no objectivity and no subjectivity. For this reason, there is not objective knowledge of reality, the world has no predestination whatsoever to knowledge. The world does not exist because we do not know it, because knowledge itself, belongs to the world’s illusion. It is not exclusively a form of alienation, the problem is even greater. It is a perpetual becoming-object of the subject and, at the same time, the perpetual becoming-subject of the object (*Le Pacte de lucidité ou l’intelligence du Mal*, 2004).

The generalised exchange created by flows and networks lead to its own degeneration. Opposite terms cancel each other out. There are no longer any theories and anti-theories; everything is wiped out in the synthesis. With every disappearance of dialectic resolution, there is a rise in power of the extremes. No more history in progress, there will be no reconciliation whatsoever. The events that make up history are now, first of all, possible and can then be implemented: the event’s historical time, affection’s psychological time, judgement’s subjective time and reality’s objective time are re-discussed at the same time by real time (*Le Pacte de lucidité ou l’intelligence du Mal*, 2004).

Let us consider the terroristic attack of 11th September. Prior to the event, it was too early to be possible (CIA experts were aware of the fact that this could have happened, but they did not believe it) and, after the event, it was too late³.

Or rather, Diana’s death. According to Baudrillard, Diana was not innocent and we, in our capacity of simple spectators, were not guilty. There are no longer any spectators and protagonists; everybody is incorporated in the same reality and same responsibility. Diana, in terms of exhibition, said Baudrillard, was not innocent and the photographers were only the instruments of the current world of communication, who seek out the scoop and rotate around the reality shows.

There is too much of everything and the system has come to a halt due to excess. Reversibility exists, but in the form of vendetta (*Le Pacte de lucidité ou l’intelligence du Mal*, 2004).

4. Death

4.1 The death of time and society

What can be seen in Baudrillard’s analysis is the birth in our society of a different relationship with history and time. The search for hyperreality establishes the diffusion of new, founding values: immortality, homologation and cloning. Aspects that go ahead endlessly, which prove the dream of the non-end. Cloning, for example, as being an attempt to defeat death, an attempt to separate reproduction from sex, represents mankind’s way of playing with the future of the species.

As a vital illusion, which is without end but, however, without desire, tension and passion. If history can no longer reach the end, then history no longer exists (*The vital illusion*, 2000).

³ The attacks committed on 11th September are featured in another work by the author (*L’esprit du terrorisme*, 2002) which has been analysed in the following paragraph.

It is therefore the end of time, but also the death of society (*A l'ombre des majorités silencieuses ou la fin du social*, 1978).

The vitality of society was subjected to a state of crisis at the very moment it became *mass society*, or rather, in an implosive phenomenon, in a black hole where society was swallowed up.

Today's masses do not reflect society, nor are they reflected in society, but society's mirror shattered on them. If, according to the Marxist perspective, society became the absolute point of reference, today, society's energy has been overturned and its historical quality and idealism has disappeared. Society, today, has no name, it is just a mass.

Because of the continuous proliferation of information, social energy has cooled down, absorbed by the mass. It appears as being an obscure sea of lost atoms without any voice, subjected to the morality of information, a saturated mass of hyper-reproduced sense, but which it no longer refracts. Once the zero point of wishes has been reached, there is no longer any representation of society possible, and it is, therefore, destined to be resuscitated continuously by means of surveys, tests and referendums, which transmit the mass media size, or rather what is simulated (*A l'ombre des majorités silencieuses ou la fin du social*, 1978).

4.2 The war between truth and fiction: the 11th of September

In a scenario in which Baudrillard acknowledged the destruction and disappearance of truth in the kingdom of information and imagery, everything would have followed the dominion of illusion and appearance.

The attacks committed on 11th September represented, for Baudrillard, the absolute event, which included all those events that had never taken place. Evil is everywhere, like an obscure object of desire and this is the form of complicity used by terrorists.

The Twin Towers embodied a defined order; they symbolised power, force and stability, but they fell, they were destroyed in a gesture of repulsion against the definitive order. Baudrillard sustained that the rise in power of the power ends up with aggravating the will to destroy it. The West, therefore, declared war on itself. When the situation is so monopolised by worldwide power, what remains but a terrorist attack, which allows the situation to be changed (*L'esprit du terrorisme*, 2002).

The attack on the World Trade Centre represented the symbolic collapse of the entire system. Against a system that launches a challenge through its excess of power, terrorists respond in the very heart of the system, with a definitive action, which is impossible to change again.

According to Baudrillard, it is an immoral action that responds to another immoral action: globalisation. This is the example that both Good and Evil both grow in power at the same time and the triumph achieved by one does not lead to the destruction of the other. They are both diehards. This implies that Evil has no end.

We are witnessing a new form of terrorism, a new form of action that plays and takes possession of the rules of the game: money, information and aeronautic technology, the spectacular size in dimensions, the media networks, these are the instruments characteristic in the globalisation process, which made the largest power in the West (the United States of America) such, and are the same weapons used by terrorists. Terrorism has taken possession of them and they have become the weapons to strike down the great power. They have exploited the real time of images and their immediate worldwide diffusion (*L'esprit du terrorisme*, 2002).

The same simultaneous nature of information and images, which leads one to ask if the Gulf War ever really existed (*La guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu*, 1991).

This provocation by Baudrillard arrived at establishing the absolute certainty as to the existence of this conflict in crisis. This war, in fact, might be considered as being virtual, precisely, due to its qualitative difference compared to wars in the past. Its abstract nature, the use of a deferred force by means of electronic and IT systems in space, the distance between the enemies, which precludes a contest. War, in its traditional sense, is placed under discussion.

The Gulf War became a simulacrum for war; its virtuality determined the elimination of the identity of the event, itself. It is the moment in which information records the event that the event itself takes place.

Conclusions

Make-believe, deceit, pornography, nothingness, evil, death, these are some of the concepts and thematic nucleuses that emerge through analysis of Jean Baudrillard's works.

His is an observation that leaves the reader, in some cases, disturbed, stupefaction dictated by *normality* and almost from the indifference with which the author deals with the topics that have always frightened mankind, underlining, almost cynically, how Evil is everywhere and how mankind lives almost continually seduced by make-believe.

Cynicism that, in my opinion, has emerged, in a way that is almost shocking in the analysis of some painful facts for both man and all humanity, like wars (consider the analysis of the Gulf War) or the attacks committed on 11th September.

The coldness adopted by Baudrillard in these themes cannot, however, but make us admit that, in spite of its brutality, this is an observation which, observed objectively, permits us to observe a little truth. I share, in fact, the analysis that the author has made on society. I recognise myself in some important points indicated in his thoughts, particularly, on virtual domination and the seduction that possesses the individual.

In fact, I agree with Baudrillard when he affirms that the world is created and lived by simulacra, of which mankind is victim because he is continually seduced, seeking satisfaction and happiness that will never come.

But, I believe that this is not a situation that the individual submits to totally. Rather, I believe that it is the result of the choices made, because they are the ones desired by mankind, because they provide relief from a state of insecurity and continuous lack of satisfaction, but I do not believe that this is only the effect of the simulacra's total dominion. I believe that it represents, above all, a power play between these two poles: between the virtual, which spills over into society and the power of objects, and the individual who has created this virtual state and what he continues to work on.

What is mainly lacking from Baudrillard's line of thought is the attempt to draw up a solution, a future perspective. What has been submitted is a stimulating point of view that allows us to observe the world and which, perhaps, shows us some indicators that he used that are not really that distant from social reality, but where will we end up? If Evil is everywhere, if nothingness surrounds us, what is the answer that society can provide for this situation? Clearly, I do not expect our author to have provided us with a forecast for the future, of what will happen, but I do believe, in any case, that he should have continued his analysis and, at least, have made some conjectures on the future.

Was this done intentionally?

I believe that the author was trapped in the emptiness of that void that was central to his perspective. Did he, himself, create a vortex in which nothingness rotated on itself and was the force promoting another form of emptiness, from which Baudrillard was unable to find a way out. His assumption was that in order to deal with a world that is unintelligible and problematic; our objective is that of making the world ever more unintelligible and enigmatic (*The vital illusion*, 2000). In order to get to know the *true* reality, one must get ever closer to the false reality, an unintelligible reality.

Nevertheless, I believe that it is time to overcome this analytic emptiness in its perspective. It is time to get out of this vortex, to re-emerge from the void.

It is time for sociology to continue Baudrillard's observations, to use the simulation perspective as an analysis grid of society, trying to understand what new dimensions emerge in the process. If the simulacra (third order) are able to explain a number of contemporary, social phenomena to our author, social change may be analysed by means of the transformation that changes this order.

The simulacra, as a generative form that creates and permits knowledge of post-modern phenomena by means of the dimension that characterise it, in its capacity of a structure that moulds society into its own image (Viviani, 2008, Secondulfo, 2009), is even a dynamic force that changes to become something else (Goethe, 1983). This makes the assumption as to the birth and development of a form that will once again change social phenomena, impressing new dimensions and characteristics (Viviani, 2011). A new form will arise, perhaps even a new order of simulacra, maybe something different but, undoubtedly, a new grid for interpretation purposes, a new instrument that sociology will be able to use to analyse the social context.

Compared to the analysis made by Baudrillard, if we observe our society we see, for example, that the implosion of the two poles, true and false, continued its course and now not only has virtuality entered into reality but it would appear that the process continues to evolve ever more as an implosion of the real into the virtual⁴. A turnaround that requires a step forward in relation to Baudrillard's perspective. A reversal that must be interpreted by means of different, updated interpretation.

I believe that sociology could provide an answer. Nevertheless I believe, above all, that the simulacra is no longer nothingness, the point of arrival, but *something*, a new point of departure.

To establish or confirm the degree of falseness implemented by the simulation does not permit one to go beyond, to track down and interpret this situation. It is therefore necessary to observe and understand the phenomena, overcoming the fleeting nature and the ambiguity dictated by the simulacra logic, in order to be able to face the *new reality*, a reality that ceases to be nothingness, emptiness, but which is enriched by a new dimension. If, initially, virtuality created emptiness in reality because it destroyed reality itself, with the implosion of reality in virtuality, it is now reality that creates the presence in virtual emptiness.

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⁴ Just think about the world of video games. The subject no longer plays with the virtual world by means of an external "prosthesis", which allows him to enter virtuality; today, he can play merely by positioning himself in front of the monitor and use his own capacities like a technological prosthesis. If I move my right hand, I can hit a ball in a hypothetical tennis match; I can dance like Michael Jackson, etc.

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