

# Jean Baudrillard

## A Very Short Introduction

*by Doug Mann*

Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) was a French philosopher and cultural analyst who started his academic life as a Marxist sociologist interested in consumer society (he completed his Ph.D. thesis in 1966). He concluded that what was formerly a society of production had now (after World War II) become one of consumption.

Becoming slowly dissatisfied with Marxism, he went on to incorporate structuralism and semiology into his analysis, seeing the objects we consume as a system of signs that had to be decoded, this system being embedded in structures of consumption and leisure that he felt could be analysed sociologically. He laid out his semiotic analysis of consumer society in his books *The System of Objects* (1968), *The Consumer Society* (1970), and *The Mirror of Production* (1975). His most important earlier work is *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), in which he rejected Marxism as the only valid way of analysing consumer society.

Marx said that objects all have a "use value": for example, a hammer is useful for hammering nails into a board. But under capitalism, all objects are reduced to their "exchange value," their value or price in the marketplace (the hammer might cost \$10 in the local hardware store). Baudrillard said, so far, so good; but he added that, at least in advanced capitalist countries, consumer goods also have a *sign exchange value*: they are signs of distinction, taste, and social status. A BMW or a gold watch can certainly have both use and exchange value (we can drive the BMW to work, or sell the watch to a used jewellery dealer); but, says Baudrillard, we also have to understand their status as signs in the code of consumer values - they signify *social distinction*. As you drive your BMW down the main street, you're saying to the unwashed masses "I'm no longer one of you - I'm distinct, a member of the wealthy and discriminating classes." It's the BMW's symbolic value, it's *cachet*, that makes it so irresistible to these classes. Lastly, Baudrillard imagined a utopian realm where we all engage in *symbolic exchange*, where the gifts we give cease to be consumer objects with exchange or sign values, becoming instead symbols of friendship, love, or community.

In the 1980s and 90s, Baudrillard turned away in a large degree from Marxism and structuralism to post-structuralism. He became the high

priest of postmodern culture, turning toward an extreme version of McLuhan's communications theory - he was fascinated by how media affect our perception of reality and the world. He concluded that in the postmodern media-laden condition, we experience something called "the death of the real": we live our lives in the realm of hyperreality, connecting more and more deeply to things like television sitcoms, music videos, virtual reality games, or Disneyland, things that merely simulate reality.

Early in this new phase of his work, Baudrillard reflected on love. In his book *On Seduction* (1980), he claims that there are two modes of love. The seductive female mode, which is artificial and symbolic, involves flirtations, double entendres, sly looks, whispered promises, but a putting off of the actual sexual act. It involves the manipulation of signs like makeup, fashion, and titillating gestures to achieve control over a symbolic order. On the other side is the male sexual mode, centered on the phallus, which is direct and natural, seeking to master a real order - to complete the sexual act. On top of each of these modes is now layered the "cool" seduction of media images pumped out by television, radio and film.

He continues this theme of cool seduction in his book *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1988 in translation). Here Baudrillard discusses how we surrender ourselves in an "ecstasy of communication," to the seductive power of the mass media - television, ads, films, magazines, and newspapers (though Baudrillard is an avid film fan). The luminous eyes of television and computer screens penetrate into our private spaces in an ecstatic and obscene way - our secrets disappear, and the images we consume become more and more pornographic.

In the middle of the eighties Baudrillard hit the road. His travelogue *America* (1986 in French) creates a simulacrum of the America he travelled across. He talks about the violence of the Wild West, jazz, the empty deserts of the South-West, the neon lights of motels at night, tribal warfare between gangs in New York City, and much more. Baudrillard saw America as a glittering emptiness, a savage, empty non-culture, in short, as the purest symbol of the hyperreal culture of the postmodern age.

In his lecture on film given in Sydney, Australia in 1987, *The Evil Demon of Images*, Baudrillard claims that although the US lost the Vietnam war on the ground, they won it in the hyperreal realm through films like *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*, which fantastically replay the war not as the story of defeat by a determined enemy, but as that of

internal division. Cinematographically, the Americans defeat themselves.

Before the Gulf War of 1991, Baudrillard wrote an article in *Libération* in which he claimed that the war wouldn't take place. Afterwards, he claimed that it hadn't taken place, for the Western audience was aware of it only as a series of hyperreal images on our TV screens. There was no real enemy - Saddam Hussein was a former US ally in the Middle East - and the outcome was entirely predictable. So despite the horrible loss of life (mostly on the Iraqi side), the war was at best a hyperreal war. Baudrillard's work in the 1990s continued to focus on this theme of the hyperreality of postmodern culture, his writing becoming more disjointed and aphoristic (perhaps echoing Nietzsche's style). He reverses course somewhat in his short work *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2003 revised edition), calling the attack on the Twin Towers "the mother of all events" that the disenfranchised of the world secretly fantasized about. Yet the American military response to 9/11 was yet another pseudo-event, yet another voyage into the (Afghan) desert of the real.

Going back to the beginning of his "postmodern" phase, Baudrillard starts his important essay "The Precession of the Simulacra" by recounting the feat of imperial map-makers in an story by Jorge Luis Borges who make a map so large and detailed that it covers the whole empire, existing in a one-to-one relationship with the territory underlying it. It is a perfect replica of the empire. After a while the map begins to fray and tatter, the citizens of the empire mourning its loss (having long taken the map - the simulacrum of the empire - for the real empire). Under the map the real territory has turned into a desert, a "desert of the real." In its place, a *simulacrum* of reality - the frayed mega-map - is all that's left.

The term "simulacrum" goes all the way back to Plato, who used it to describe a false copy of something. Baudrillard has built his whole post-1970s theory of media effects and culture around his own notion of the simulacrum. He argues that in a postmodern culture dominated by TV, films, news media, and the Internet, the whole idea of a true or a false copy of something has been destroyed: all we have now are *simulations* of reality, which aren't any more or less "real" than the reality they simulate.

In our culture, claims Baudrillard, we take "maps" of reality like television, film, etc. as more real than our actual lives - these "simulacra" (hyperreal copies) precede our lives. Our television

"friends" (e.g. sit-com characters) might seem more alive to us than their flesh-and-blood equivalents ("did you see what Jerry/Rachel/Frasier did last night?"). We communicate by e-mail, and relate to video game characters like Lara Croft better than our own friends and family. We drive on freeways to shopping malls full of identical chain stores and products, watch television shows about film directors and actors, go to films about television production, vote for ex-Hollywood actors for president (is he really an actor? Or a politician? It doesn't matter). In fact, we get nervous and edgy if we're away too long from our computers, our e-mail accounts, our cell phones. Now the *real* empire lays in tatters, the hyperreal map still quite intact. We have entered an era where third-order simulacra dominate our lives, where the image has lost any connection to real things.

Baudrillard's later philosophy of culture can be mapped in terms of three things: (1) the orders of simulacra, (2) the "phases of the image" - the four levels at which art represents reality, and (3) the three phases of utopian and science-fiction writing he saw corresponding to these orders and phases. We see how these three sets of distinctions parallel each other in the chart below (I've added what I think are some appropriate examples from popular culture that fit each category):

<i>Orders of Simulacra</i>	<i>Phases of the Image</i>	<i>Utopias &amp; Science-Fiction</i>
1. <b>Symbolic Order:</b> Society is organized as a fixed system of signs distributed according to rank and obligation (e.g. in the feudal era a peasant couldn't become the King). The question of reality doesn't arise: the meaning of signs is already established in advance (by God or power structures).	1. Art reflects a basic reality (see "Precession of the Simulacra" for an extended discussion). Example: Gothic paintings depict the birth of Jesus as the true son of God, replete with signs of his divinity (the Three Wise Men, a halo over the Madonna's head, etc.).	1. No need for utopian or science-fiction writing: the utopian order already exists in the here and now.
2. <b>First Order of Simulacra:</b> The Early Modern period, from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution. A competition for the meaning of signs starts. Simulacra aim to restore an ideal image of nature. Fakes and counterfeits enter the scene: baroque angels, concrete chairs, theatre, fashion. But true originals underlie the fakes.	2. Art masks and perverts a basic reality. Example: baroque paintings of an impossibly beautiful Jesus ascending to the heavens like Superman, with the Madonna watching with a blissful look on her face.	2. Utopias: Transcendental or romantic dreams, counterfeit copies of the real world. "If only we got everything right, life would be beautiful!" Thomas More's <i>Utopia</i> . Francis Bacon's <i>New Atlantis</i> .
3. <b>Second Order of Simulacra:</b> From the Industrial Revolution up til	3. Art masks the absence of a basic reality. Example:	3. The Classic Science-Fiction of the Age of Mass Production: robots,

<p>the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mass production of copies or replicas of a single prototype: cars, planes, fridges, clothes, books. Liberation of energy through the machine (Marx's world). Copies more or less indistinguishable. Reproduced things aren't counterfeits: they're just as "real" as their prototype (though we can still recognize the prototype).</p>	<p>photography and the mechanical reproduction of paintings (see Walter Benjamin's important essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"). A framed reproduction of a Renaissance painting of the Madonna hung over one's bed, right beside a velvet image of Elvis.</p>	<p>rocket-ships to Mars, space exploration, alien invasion, intergalactic wars. Present technology projected into the future and outer space. Robert Heinlein's <i>Starship Troopers</i>. Isaac Asimov's <i>I, Robot</i>. Fifties Hollywood sci-fi films (e.g. <i>Them, It Came from Outer Space</i>). The original <i>Star Trek</i> television series. Borges' imperial map.</p>
<p>4. <b>Third Order of Simulacra:</b> The present age - dominated by simulations, things that have no original or prototype (though they may parallel something). Era of the model or code: computers, virtual reality, opinion polls, DNA, genetic engineering, cloning, the news media make the news, Nike sneakers as status symbols, Disneyland. The death of the real: no more counterfeits or prototypes, just simulations of reality - hyperreality. Information replaces the machine as the basic mode of production.</p>	<p>4. Art bears no relation to reality at all. Example: a virtual reality female talking head reads news headlines to us over the Internet. Is she real? A fake? The question has lost its meaning - there is no original to compare her to. Or Madonna (the singer) made up like Marilyn Monroe vamping it up with a troupe of lithe male dancers in a music video on MTV.</p>	<p>4. The End of Science Fiction: the real absorbed into a hyperreal, cybernetic world. Not about an alternative universe, but about a simulation of the present one. Philip K. Dick's <i>Simulacra</i>. J. G. Ballard's <i>Crash</i>. William Gibson's <i>Neuromancer</i>. Ridley Scott's film <i>Blade Runner</i>. Paul Verhoeven's film <i>Total Recall</i>. David Cronenberg's films <i>Crash</i> and <i>eXistenZ</i>. The Wachowski brothers' <i>The Matrix</i>. The Borg, the holodeck, and VR characters (Voyager's doctor) in the later <i>Star Trek</i> television series.</p>

Baudrillard's writing is difficult, and for starting philosophers and social and cultural theorists is best taken in small doses. If you read his work, remember that his central claim about postmodern culture (though he claims that he himself is *not* a postmodernist) is quite simple - that we live in a "desert of the real," a cultural space where television, film, and computer images are more "real" to us than the non-media physical reality that surrounds us. This loss of reality isn't so hard to understand, even if it's difficult for some of us to swallow.

Jean Baudrillard. Robert Irwin. Cindy Sherman. Art Theory: A Very Short Introduction concludes that despite these differences from science, art theory is still an explanatory enterprise: it involves the effort to organize a dizzying variety of phenomena so as to try to say what they have in common that makes them special. Access to the complete content on Very Short Introductions online requires a subscription or purchase.