

*Articoli/1*

## ***Baudrillard in the Future***

Gerry Coulter\* †

---

Articolo sottoposto a *peer review*. Ricevuto il 06/10/2016. Accettato il 06/12/2016

---

As we mark the tenth anniversary of the passing of Jean Baudrillard it is worthwhile to reflect on the lasting relevance of his ideas. Will Baudrillard be read in the foreseeable and even in the distant future the way Plato, Pico, or Shakespeare are today? In an attempt to answer this question the essay points to six original contributions from Baudrillard's thought that are likely to contribute to the last relevance of his works: 1) the relationship he pointed to between philosophy and literature, 2) his embrace of 'emptiness', 3) his thought concerning the poetic resolution of the world, 4) his writings on reversibility, 5) the critique of Marx, and 6) his work on simulation. These aspects of his work, among others, may well see Baudrillard's work stand the rigors of the test of time.

\*\*\*

«Naturally, if you provoke then you must expect some counter provocation and some negative reaction. The fact that it is so virulent is really quite interesting. It shows that in a way my negativity has passed on to them, subliminally perhaps, which is what I expected. I would say there has been a *hyper-reaction* to my work and from that point of view I have succeeded»

J. Baudrillard, *Interview with S. Moore and S. Johnson*

### **1. Introduction**

We have hundreds of pages of Plato translated into dozens of languages [including much of what we know of the thought of his teacher Socrates] yet only a few meagre fragments of the thoughts of Heraclitus and Sappho. Some works disappear in wars and fires: Gone with the library at Alexandria was Berossus' *Babyloniaca* (*History of the World*, 281 BC) as was the work of Aristarchus of

---

\* Gerry Coulter (1959-2016) was founding and managing editor of the *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*. An authority on the writing of Baudrillard he has authored: *Jean Baudrillard: From the Ocean to the Desert or the Poetics of Radicality* (2012); *Art After the Avant-Garde: Baudrillard's Challenge* (2014); and *From Achilles to Zarathustra: Jean Baudrillard on Theorists, Intellectuals, Artists, and Others* (2016). He has won Bishop's University's highest award for teaching – The William and Nancy Turner Prize.

Samos (310-230 BC) who understood that the earth orbited as he did the relative size of the solar system. Why is Nietzsche much more widely read today than in his own lifetime? If Hitler's forces had won World War Two one suspects that the anti-Semite Houston Chamberlain (1855-1927) would have become a key historian in the new Nazi approved canon<sup>1</sup>. There are many reasons for the survival of a thinker's work across time which range from the good fortune to survive and become part of the 'canon' all the way down to the politics of how history's winners attempt to set out our reading lists. Assuming a work survives wars, fires, floods and the occasional zealot set on burning thought s/he does not agree with, the importance of the questions raised, original insights offered, and quality of the writing itself play very significant roles in the continued interest in a writer's work. The fragments of Heraclitus remain interesting because he offered original thought on key aspects of change, the unity of opposites, and becoming. We read the little of Sappho that survives, as we do the works of Shakespeare, or Roland Barthes to be impressed by a writer's virtuosity of language.

This essay is concerned with the potential durability of the thought of Jean Baudrillard on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of his passing. Will he still be read in 2000 or 5000 years? Assuming his work survives fires, floods, wars, zealots and other catastrophes (including the catastrophe of the digital),<sup>2</sup> my argument is that Baudrillard's work will survive and remain of interest for its originality, importance, and the quality of his writing.

## 2. Baudrillard's Thought and the Test of Time

Like Nietzsche Baudrillard's thought also has originality and innovation on his side. In this section I point to six innovative areas of his oeuvre that may very well contribute strongly to the ability of his thought to stand the test of time. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list but it does allow us to consider why his work will be difficult to simply forget. These involve his understanding of: 1) the relationship between philosophy and literature; 2) his embrace of 'emptiness'; 3) poetic resolution of the world; 4) reversibility; 5) his critique of Marx; and 6) the simulation thesis.

### *Baudrillard and the Relationship Between Philosophy and Literature*

Baudrillard is emblematic of one of the most significant turns in the thought of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – the coming together of literature and philosophy. Baudrillard's work was paramount among contemporary theorists for showing how, by example, theory fed off literature and art as our poststructural present advanced after the mid-1960s<sup>3</sup>. His work

---

<sup>1</sup> H. Chamberlain, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (2 Volumes), Oxford 1959.

<sup>2</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Lucidity Pact or, The Intelligence of Evil*, London 2005, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> G. Coulter, *Jean Baudrillard: From the Ocean to the Desert or the Poetics of Radicality*, USA 2012, pp. 6-13.

is littered with references to Borges, Calvino, Canetti, Céline, Hölderlin, Hugo, Nabokov, Rimbaud, Rushdie, Swinburne, and dozens of other literary writers and poets<sup>4</sup>. How these literary references may assist in the survival of Baudrillard's thought have to do with 1) the originality with which he employed these 'non-objective' sources and 2) how he himself took on a literary and poetic, as opposed to an objective-philosophical stance in his very writing. To point to an example of the first we need look no further than Canetti. Baudrillard drew on Canetti's *Crowds and Power* (1960)<sup>5</sup> for the idea that, while the mass is a dull type of body, transmission of it can be ultra-rapid<sup>6</sup>. There is a brilliance to Canetti's insights that Baudrillard finds irresistible: «With nuclear power and the bomb, said Canetti, in a superb image, we have annexed the sun; we have dashed it down onto the earth, without any possibility of surrendering it, and its light then is a light of death»<sup>7</sup>. The impact of literary writers like Canetti or Nabokov on Baudrillard was to push him to greater extremes of thought.

Baudrillard felt that Nabokov's writing: «...rediscovers the traces of a primal disorder, the plastic vehemence of things without qualities, the erotic energy of a worthless universe»<sup>8</sup>. Baudrillard lauds Nabokov's hostility to psychoanalysis and says this is something he shares with other 'great minds' (including Baudrillard). He was also very pleased by Nabokov's ease with randomness in existence and his respect for destiny<sup>9</sup>. Nabokov was the kind of writer Baudrillard could relate to at an intellectual level as in his own pondering our ability to achieve escape velocity from the trap of identity and do something extraordinary<sup>10</sup>. Baudrillard is also an example of what theory has to learn from literature. For example: his own notion of a thin veneer of reality spread out over natural and artificial matter derived, he acknowledged, from Nabokov's writing<sup>11</sup>. There is, in both Baudrillard and Nabokov, an intense awareness of being aware of being.

Baudrillard took philosophical writing into literary precincts seldom before explored to the point that philosophical writing could be shaped by literary writing and poetics.

Baudrillard's work will almost certainly stand as the leading example, for some time, of the insight that theory, at its best, might rise to the status of literature. That is, we might recognize that all theory (no matter how empirically based, or how steeped in literature or poetics), can recognize itself in its highest form – and this form is fable. «Theory» Baudrillard wrote «is never so fine as when it takes the form of a fiction or a fable».<sup>12</sup> It helps if we think of this as

---

<sup>4</sup> For an exhaustive accounting of these figures, see Id., *From Achilles to Zarathustra: Jean Baudrillard on Theorists, Intellectuals, Artists, and Others*, USA 2016.

<sup>5</sup> E. Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, New York 1960.

<sup>6</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, New York 2005, p. 152.

<sup>7</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Lucidity Pact*, cit., p. 189.

<sup>8</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Art and Artefact*, London 1997, p. 28

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10; J. Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, New York 2001, p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, cit., p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> Especially Nabokov, 1972: 486; see J. Baudrillard, *Cool Memories V*, New York 2006, p. 111.

<sup>12</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Cool Memories V*, cit., p. 11.

Nietzsche said of 'truth' – that it is merely an illusion which we do not yet realize to be illusion.<sup>13</sup> Baudrillard's literary inspired form of thought played a vital role in the reevaluation of concepts like capital 'T' Truth, capital 'M' Meaning, and capital 'R' Real (the capitals here stand in for universal or shared understandings). Concepts such as truth, meaning, the real (lower case) do indeed exist along each of our local and restricted horizons – always as «partial objects».<sup>14</sup> As such, Baudrillard's poetic and literary approach to thought is central not only to his overall contribution to poststructuralist philosophy but quite possibly to a lasting understanding that all theory, the best of theory, is fiction. This is an important development in theoretical writing and one that Continental thought in particular is not likely to surrender in the future.

### *Baudrillard's Embrace of Emptiness*

The technologies being developed in our lifetime will make it much more difficult to exist in the future with traditional philosophical views of identity, being, and our place in an existence that seems ever more uncertain and multiple as we increasingly become information. As Baudrillard put it precisely: «My double is wandering through the networks where I shall never meet him».<sup>15</sup> Baudrillard's way of coping with the new technologies was to rely on his own version of existential absurdity theory. He understood that the very absurdity of existence was being exponentialized by the new technologies.

Baudrillard's is an example of how to «move faster than identity».<sup>16</sup> For Baudrillard identity is a deeply problematic concept and will become even more so as our lives are plunged deeper into digitalization. Identity, the watchword of so much of academic thought in the past twenty years has become for Baudrillard «a dream, pathetic in its absurdity» the obsession of beings who live in an «ultra-integrated world».<sup>17</sup> As we move forward and begin to critically engage better with identity Baudrillard's understanding was that identity is always falling apart, always dying<sup>18</sup>. For Baudrillard we never fully know who we are precisely because identity is always in flux<sup>19</sup>.

In short, the very radicality of Baudrillard's resistance to all things 'required' of us by our culture should stand him in good stead in cultural analysis for some time. Rather than tumble into the trap of identity Baudrillard was for the embrace of ambiguity, and a kind of emptiness in relation to identity, which places him at the center of the most radical applications of semiotics in the twentieth century. If meaning generally has been destabilized then for Baudrillard this fact applies

---

<sup>13</sup> F. Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in the Non-Moral Sense*, in W. Kaufman, *The Portable Nietzsche*, New York 1976.

<sup>14</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor 1994, p. 108.

<sup>15</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> R. Barthes, *Writer Sollers*, Minneapolis 1987, p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Paroxysm*, New York 1998, p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, London 1993, p. 159.

<sup>19</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, New York 1993, p. 165.

to identity too. Baudrillard will probably remain one of the 'go to' sources on identity as our existences become more virtual and 'liquid'. With the passage of time it will not be surprising to find him as a leading 'classical' thinker in what will surely be a burgeoning literature on identity and technology. His own embrace of emptiness and ambiguity may continue to offer a liberating version of thought to subsequent generations (as may that of Barthes).

### *Poetic Resolution*

While Baudrillard was no Romantic (he described our era as neo-Romantic)<sup>20</sup> he possessed a remarkable poetic sensibility which informed his contribution to theory. Baudrillard knew his Hölderlin and shared the sensibilities of the poet whose work he had translated from German to French in the 1950s. As Hölderlin found humankind's search for one truth and one way disappointing<sup>21</sup> Baudrillard said the same thing of our mania for the 'real'.<sup>22</sup> What Baudrillard took most from poets like Hölderlin or Rimbaud (his favourite) was the vital idea that we have access to many more enriching ways of knowing the world than mere science. For him, theory is an art form and can be concerned with the poetic resolution and transfiguration of the world. It is precisely this insight which makes Baudrillard so wonderful to read today and may well do so in the future. After all, as he understood, the world is given to us an enigmatic and often unintelligible, why do we feel we have to 'solve' it into numbers. Why shouldn't thought play with the world and make it even more enigmatic, even more unintelligible (as poets often do).<sup>23</sup> Among Baudrillard's gift to thought is to ask us to consider that thought is as easily biased towards the enigmatic as it is towards the straightforward or the easy solution.

As we enter deeper into the totalitarian digital networks of surveillance and automation Baudrillard should remain of some use for thinkers who wish to forge strategies of resistance to increased systematization and leaving open possibilities for non-scientific knowledges. For Baudrillard this includes what we are presently pursuing in our concern for security in an era of both state-sponsored and freelance terrorism. Against the rhetoric of the likes of George W. Bush who called for the ending of terrorism Baudrillard, having once lived under the Nazi's as a child, replied:

...what kind of state would be capable of dissuading and annihilating terrorism in the bud? ...It would have to arm itself with such terrorism and generalize terror on every level. If this is the price of security, is everybody deep-down dreaming of this?<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, New York 1990.

<sup>21</sup> F. Hölderlin, *Selected Poems*, Newcastle upon Tyne 1994, p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, New York 1996, p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*, New York 2000, p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, cit., p. 22.

For Baudrillard much of the challenge posed by writing was to find poetic power in its primal state and to bring it to the fore in writing as in the previous example on terrorism. To the future Baudrillard sent his artful writing which refuses to sacrifice the art of thinking and writing to any concept, system, or easy solution.

### *Reversibility*

From his earliest writing Baudrillard was concerned with the globalizing catastrophe of the West – the system that has the absolute misfortune to have ‘abolished elsewhere’ while seeing all systems, except itself, as relative.<sup>25</sup> He believed that the future of the West would be little different from all previous dominant cultures in that every system works to undermine itself eventually. This notion of reversibility came to Baudrillard from his deep reading of both history and anthropology. Given his belief that all systems undermine themselves (an idea that we can trace back at least to Herodotus),<sup>26</sup> Baudrillard saw the role of the theorist as anticipating systemic collapse and encouraging it. This is why his thought is useful to those who wish to get out of the present capitalist system without necessarily building its mirror nightmare – Marxism. The idea that theory is perpetual challenge and is not to be used to shore up or defend the present system, or to build any system for that matter, may be very useful in the future. It is possible that the politics of the future will not be global (globalization is not guaranteed to win out), but rather much more local. People living in various parts of what we called ‘countries’ in our time may operate with radically different ways of being and doing. Baudrillard’s idea of theory as constant challenge to whatever system is in place may well find a certain popularity. It does not seem that far-fetched to expect humans to eventually tire of trying to fit people into systems, but rather, to develop ways of knowing and being and doing that allow maximal individual freedom while eschewing rigid bureaucratic systemic thought. Baudrillard will be of great value to such ‘post critical theory’ projects. What is radical about Baudrillard’s approach is that it never settles on one approach – it is always against whatever system exists: ‘One must push what is collapsing’, said Nietzsche. ...Theoretical violence, not truth, is the only resource we have left us». <sup>27</sup> Our future as free individuals may well rest on our ability to constantly push at systems and our own most cherished concepts until they topple over. The task of theory for free beings is thus dependent for Baudrillard upon constant provocation leading to destabilization. As he acknowledged: «...among all those disciplines that one traverses or ironizes or whatever, no one of them is privileged. That goes for myself too. I don’t have any doctrines to defend. I have one strategy, that’s all». <sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, cit., pp. 142, 145.

<sup>26</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, London 1998, I, v.

<sup>27</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, cit., pp. 143, 157, 163.

<sup>28</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*, edited by M. Gane, London 1993, p. 82.

To the future Baudrillard has gifted a powerful strategy of resistance steeped in the ancient understanding that systems tend to undermine themselves.

*The Critique of Marx*

Baudrillard found Marxism useful in his early days but came to distance himself from it after 1968<sup>29</sup> during the writing of the *Mirror of Production*.<sup>30</sup> For Baudrillard time has passed Marx's by. Baudrillard would have preferred to live in a time when Marx's writings were fresh and new, when politics had more meaning, and there were more things in which believe. However, Baudrillard like each of us had to face the challenges of contemporary life and the revolution of our time which is, as he said so well: «the uncertainty revolution».<sup>31</sup>

Baudrillard to wrote, what were for Marxists, heretical words in his major work on Marx: «Marx is not in an historical position to speak the truth».<sup>32</sup> For Baudrillard, Marx was merely the owner of «a perspective» which was resigned to one view concerning the «laws of history and dialectics».<sup>33</sup> Baudrillard then undertook a radical questioning of all of Marx's concepts<sup>34</sup> leading to a critique of the structural limits of Marx's theory.<sup>35</sup> Baudrillard's passage through Marx became one of the signs of poststructuralist times.

At a general level Baudrillard's challenge to Marx is that his writing no longer explains contemporary society. In this, Marx, like all theorists, succumbs to an unavoidable reversibility – the inversion which is the fate of every theory and critique.<sup>36</sup> For Baudrillard a kind of revolution had taken place in value which Marx's analysis was unable to explain.<sup>37</sup> What he meant by this is that Marx was focused on 'classical' value – the more natural stage of use-value and the commodity stage of exchange value. Today value has passed through a structural stage (sign value), and is entering a fractal stage – a point of no reference at all «where value radiates in all directions».<sup>38</sup> As he told Philippe Petit: «we lost use-value, then good old exchange value, obliterated by speculation, and we are currently losing even sign value for an indefinite signaletics».<sup>39</sup>

Baudrillard also pointed out (against Marx's expectations), that «capital has not lurched from one crisis to another».<sup>40</sup> In Baudrillard's assessment, Marx was turned away from radical exigency (as were many 19th century thinkers); by

---

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Fragments: Interviews with François L'Yvonnet*, New York 2004, p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, cit., p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, St. Louis 1975, p. 117.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21 ff.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Baudrillard Live*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> J. Baudrillard, *America*, New York 1998, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, New York 2002, p. 23.

the need he felt to devise historical laws.<sup>41</sup> Marx thus adopted a law of necessity and the idea of perpetual transcendence.<sup>42</sup> Post-feudal history is transhistoricized by Marx (universalized) as the class struggle and the mode of production is projected into all of history.<sup>43</sup> This mindset, combined with a belief in dialectics, allowed Marx to fabricate labour power and production into the equivalent of historical reason working itself out.<sup>44</sup> In Marx then, Baudrillard finds the negativity of labour lost as it has been raised to an absolute value<sup>45</sup> and so, within Marx's writing, labour becomes an ideological concept.<sup>46</sup>

For Baudrillard, Marx constructed a theory which is «irredeemably partial»<sup>47</sup> lacking a truly «radical analysis of labour and production».<sup>48</sup> Among the most vital of the more general problems Baudrillard had with Marx is that «ideological priority is given to exchange value».<sup>49</sup> Marx thus fails to conceive of social wealth being founded by other than labour and production.<sup>50</sup> Marx's writing is thus incapable of doing that which it promises – theorizing total social practice<sup>51</sup> and is entirely incapable of «responding to a social process that far exceeds material production» [such as contemporary mass media].<sup>52</sup> As for dialectics, in our time of hypertelia, proliferation, and indeterminacy, they are finished for Baudrillard. Transcendence, that most urgent Marxist concept, is no longer viable.<sup>53</sup> For Baudrillard, the world no longer has a chance of escape into an upper realm of Truth, God, the Law, or the Idea, but merely the lower reaches of immanence.<sup>54</sup>

Baudrillard also questions the place of freedom in Marx's analysis. He says that for Marx, freedom is based on the domination of nature (a very capitalist idea),<sup>55</sup> and that Marx makes a promise of liberation out of what is (and has repeatedly been shown to be since Marx's time) «a process of repression».<sup>56</sup> What happens with Marx, and Marxists who follow him, is that a great irony occurs – those who seek to revolutionize class struggle actually put an end to it «burying it under a theoretical project».<sup>57</sup> It is this very contingent, determinist, universalized theoretical project – ideologically committed to productivism via labour and man's command of nature, which leads us, in Baudrillard's assessment,

---

<sup>41</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, cit., p. 161.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47, 67.

<sup>44</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, cit., p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, cit., p. 34.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>47</sup> J. Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, St. Louis 1981, p. 165.

<sup>48</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, cit., pp. 21-51.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>52</sup> J. Baudrillard, *For a Critique*, cit., pp. 165-166.

<sup>53</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, cit., p. 51.

<sup>54</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, cit., p. 86.

<sup>55</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, cit., p. 67.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>57</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, in *Forget Baudrillard*, New York 1987, p. 13.

to the deeper and more specific problem with Marx: his failure to provide an alternative to productivism.<sup>58</sup>

It is, in Baudrillard's terms, the «production of the production system» which escapes Marx.<sup>59</sup> Baudrillard has a very good point here as in Marx there is a constant assumption (it is intrinsic to his understanding of labour and nature), that production is taken for granted – what is wrong is merely how it is organized. Marx's thought is infected with the virus of the past 500 years – a commitment to productivist ideology. Baudrillard quite rightly gets to the core of some very important implications of Marx's thought – especially the obvious fact that production (as a form) is not subjected by Marx to radical analysis.<sup>60</sup> Baudrillard says that Marx has kind of «theoretical allergy to everything that isn't material production and productive labour». <sup>61</sup> Marx's theory is, for Baudrillard, one that «analyzes the social field that it produces». <sup>62</sup> Marx's very analysis, despite itself, is charged by Baudrillard with «assisting the cunning of capital», «contributing to the capitalist mythology», and «reproducing the system of political economy». <sup>63</sup> In its commitment to continued productivism (post revolution), Marxism finds itself ironically in the same position as bourgeois economics. <sup>64</sup> By centering itself (from the Paris Manuscripts of 1844 onwards)<sup>65</sup> on «man's productive vocation»,<sup>66</sup> Marx's assessment of capitalist society succumbs to a dialectic and Christian ethic which produces a critique which is not radical, but rather, plays a key role in reproducing the existing system of political economy.<sup>67</sup> It is difficult to argue with Baudrillard on this point as every single authority which attempted to bring about a revolution based on Marx's ideas did indeed reproduce a state-capitalist version of capitalist political economy.<sup>68</sup>

For Baudrillard then, Marx makes the mistake of attempting to offer a radical critique of political economy in the form of political economy.<sup>69</sup> What Marx does then, is to produce not a radical alternative to productivism – but merely the mirror of capitalist production.<sup>70</sup> Marx's illusion, and all writing ultimately succumbs to illusion for Baudrillard, is that he believed in the «possibility of revolution within the system». <sup>71</sup> This leaves us with the difficult fact that Marx's theory, when we cut it to the bone as Baudrillard does, «never stopped being on

---

<sup>58</sup> J. Baudrillard, *For a Critique*, cit., p. 90.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>62</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Baudrillard Live*, cit., pp. 221-222.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31; J. Baudrillard, *For a Critique*, cit., p. 134.

<sup>64</sup> J. Baudrillard, *For a Critique*, p. 115.

<sup>65</sup> K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Moscow 1977.

<sup>66</sup> J. Baudrillard, *For a Critique*, cit., p. 36.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>69</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, cit., p. 50.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>71</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, cit., p. 35.

the side of capitalism».<sup>72</sup> This is because Marx's thought «retains concepts which depend on the metaphysics of market economy».<sup>73</sup> Marx and his followers were thus never able to go beyond capitalism (some form of state capitalism based on productivism) and a range of neo-Christian and humanist understandings of labour. In the contemporary Baudrillard finds those who were to be the heroes of the revolution turned into the silent but tired anti-heroes of consumption.<sup>74</sup> As the work of Marx is likely to remain important for the foreseeable future and well beyond, Baudrillard's devastating critique of it should also remain important.

### *The Simulation Thesis*

Baudrillard was one of a number of thinkers who recognized that all of human culture is the result of the collective sharing in/of simulacra<sup>75</sup> and that the real «has only ever been a form of simulation».<sup>76</sup> Between 1981 and 2000 he became the preminent thinker associated with the analysis of simulation. For him, even capital – the one entity to which our entire system is tethered, is nothing more than a very complex simulation.<sup>77</sup> He also saw the emergence of the bourgeois model of social organization as a gigantic exercise in simulation (which is now attempting to globalize).<sup>78</sup> We can think of any major political or economic summit of world leaders and how the event is fed, in advance, through the media processors to know the practices which concern his thought. His favorite example was the first Gulf War which he claimed «did not take place» – «a dead war»<sup>79</sup> – «a war exchanged for the signs of war».<sup>80</sup> It was, he said: «... war processing, the enemy appears only as a computerized target».<sup>81</sup> He added: «CNN's Gulf War was a prototype of the event which did not take place because it took place in real time, in the instantaneity of CNN ... Disney might restage the Gulf War as a global attraction»<sup>82</sup> where the media confuse the war with the model of war».<sup>83</sup>

Simulation is but one concept on which Baudrillard's lasting importance is likely to be tethered. It is also an important concept for how it illustrates his way of thinking which is, in his case, likely to play a role in his continued importance. It is a kind of rigorous optimism which he described in this way:

---

<sup>72</sup> Baudrillard quoted in G. Genosko (ed.), *The Uncollected Baudrillard*, London 2001, p. 95.

<sup>73</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, cit., p. 59.

<sup>74</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, London 1998, p. 182.

<sup>75</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Revenge of the Crystal*, Sydney 1990, p. 50.

<sup>76</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, New York 2003, p. 39.

<sup>77</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, cit., p. 36.

<sup>78</sup> J. Baudrillard, *For a Critique*, cit., p. 41.

<sup>79</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, New York 1995, p. 23.

<sup>80</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, Stanford 1994, p. 62.

<sup>81</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Gulf War*, cit., p. 62.

<sup>82</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, cit., p. 151.

<sup>83</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, New York 1983, pp. 83-84.

There is throughout my work something which goes like this: there are always two forms in opposition to each other, the polar opposite of each other... but there isn't any 'explanation' here. There is a type of development which is more like music or at any rate like a rhythm. There is a polarity, opposition between production and seduction, political economy and death, the fatal and the banal. You can't say, though, that this implies the existence of progress. I have never made any progress; I think everything is already there at the start but an interesting modulation takes place.<sup>84</sup>

Simulation is an interesting example of this kind of thinking precisely because of the way that the two forms, moving towards the modulation he describes, take us to an understanding that we can never succumb entirely to simulation. Baudrillard did not believe we had, as yet, fully entered into simulation because when we have entered into it fully we will no longer be able to speak of simulation.<sup>85</sup> We are however advancing further into simulation at an unprecedented pace. One of the hallmarks of our era is what he refers to as the «liquidation of all referentials»<sup>86</sup> or what we could call the beginning of an endless era without foundations which many analysts have pointed toward for the past thirty years.

Baudrillard's true genius, as concerns simulation, is that his thought is also its nemesis. He argued that the very illusion of the world would prevent us from slipping into simulation – even if that is what we desire to do. What perhaps troubles Baudrillard the most about the eruption of unprecedented levels of simulation in our lives are efforts which confuse simulation with illusion. Here we must tread very carefully because, as we know, the world is understood through the simulation that is language. Indeed, our very ability to understand any 'real' world is doubly compounded by the fact that 'real', whatever it is, remains hidden beneath an enigmatic realm of appearances.<sup>87</sup> Take for example a simple table which appears to us as flat, cool, motionless, and solid. A physicist can repeat the brilliant theory fiction (for Baudrillard all theory is fiction), in which the table is understood as a mass of swirling atomic structures and substructures. Indeed, the physicist may also point out that the spaces in between the atomic substructures occupy more of what we conceive of as the table than to the atomic substructures themselves. Whatever the 'real' table is remains hidden in these swirling atomic masses under the realm of the appearances (which we perceive as flatness, coolness, motionlessness, stability etc.). The illusion of the world is thus guaranteed, for Baudrillard, by the fact that the real always hides behind appearances and that we 'know' it through discourse.

As creatures of discourse we should know better than to take appearances or any discourse on the real for the real, or understand the real as anything but simulation. We should know that simulation is merely a hypothesis – «a game,

---

<sup>84</sup>J. Baudrillard, *Baudrillard Live*, cit., pp. 201-202.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>86</sup>J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, cit., p. 2.

<sup>87</sup>J. Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, cit., p. 72.

Baudrillard says, that turns reality itself into one eventuality among others». <sup>88</sup> The problem of simulation for a discursive creature such as humanity, in our time when the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear, is that at the same time the sign also functions to mask this disappearance. <sup>89</sup> In the future it is probable that Baudrillard will be understood to have played an equally significant role in the naming of simulation as did Newton in the naming of gravity.

### 3. Conclusion: Is Post Structuralism forever?

One thing that is likely to advance Baudrillard's writings further into the future is the seeming permanence in theory of what we might term a post structural condition. While some will continue to ignore the loss of faith in capital 'T' Truth, capital 'M' Meaning, and a capital 'R' Real, most theorists have come to accept that truth, meaning, and the real (and here we are especially indebted to Baudrillard), exist only as restricted (non-universal) concepts which each of us encounter along our local and restricted horizons. In this, Baudrillard has contributed a series of concepts, as have other poststructuralist thinkers, which may well assure the permanence of their own continued relevance. From the most radical contemporary perspective it seems unlikely that we are to pass out of our post structural condition anytime soon. If we ever do pass beyond it then thinkers like Baudrillard will most likely lose a good deal of relevance. Still, the likes of Barthes and Baudrillard will probably be remembered for their place in advancing a position in response to 1) the intolerable state of affairs in their own time and, 2) a universe which is completely indifferent to humans and their thoughts.

Baudrillard will be gone when we no longer speak his name. He gave us very good reasons to remember his work well into the future. I suspect that, like it or not, Baudrillard's writing will continue to be important to scholars throughout and well beyond the 21st century for the reasons postulated above (and many more).

Gerry Coulter †  
Bishop's University – Lennoxville

---

<sup>88</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Lucidity Pact*, cit., p. 92.

<sup>89</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Art and Artefact*, cit., pp. 12 ff.