

Baudrillard in the 21st Century (and after)

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Existence isn't everything. It is a very little thing (among Jean Baudrillard's last written fragments, March, 2007).

I. Introduction

Jean Baudrillard continues to exist in our libraries and the poetic spaces of our memories. What may be the fate of this unique thinker in our century and beyond? To probe some of the possible answers to this question I examine 1) some factors which tend to contribute to the durability of any writer, 2) the difficulty in disproving some of Baudrillard's claims (especially concerning simulation), and 3) the fact that perhaps a good deal of Baudrillard's continuing relevance is tied to that of poststructuralism.

II. The Durability of Writers and Theorists Generally

Plato is still with us for some good and some accidental reasons. The accidents involve his work's ongoing translation and survival around the world in the centuries immediately following his death. Many writers and thinkers from the Ancient world disappeared slowly over time. Only a few fragments of Heraclitus, one of the most interesting ancient Greek thinkers, survive in to our own time. Many others disappeared in a single event in the great fire at the Library of Alexandria which the Roman Army watched burn to the ground. Along with good fortune the survival of written thought is aided enormously by the fact that a writer's work is considered to be valuable by many in distant lands. This was the case with Plato as his works were not only widely distributed but deeply valued for the insights they provide to a myriad of important philosophical subjects.

Closer to our own time a writer like Shakespeare stands a very good chance of continued survival because of the brilliance of his discourse and the interest level it has sustained in successive generations. Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear and Richard III are very likely to be staged in the year 3000, 4000, or 5000 as are the surviving works of Aeschylus. As language changes and English becomes less important I suspect that Richard III will be considered an interesting character in say 51st century Mandarin.

As we look across more recent times we see the works of Nietzsche and Marx which stand a good chance of continued relevance for many centuries. Nietzsche's durability will likely be due to the sheer force of his contrarian originality and his sense of the inhuman. Marx is likely to remain relevant because it is difficult to imagine anyone ever doing a thesis on commodities without taking into account the role he played in the times in which he lived. Marx will remain important to scholars, as will Nietzsche, Shakespeare, and Plato as will numerous others because they provide original statements on a number of concepts that are likely to remain important at the methodological and theoretical level for scholars. All of this is predicated on the belief that scholarship will continue to exist, if not thrive, even in the digitized and modeled future into which humanity is propelling itself. Yet many today do not have difficulty imagining, if not a catastrophic end, at least a major event with incredibly negative implications for continued human life and scholarship during the current millennium. From this perspective those who would like to see the universities, libraries, and museums burn are ascending.

Plato, Shakespeare, Marx, and Nietzsche are reasonable examples of thinkers and writers who have survived

into a 23rd, 4th, and 2nd century due to the originality of their work. When we also look at “lesser” thinkers of the 19th century for example, we can also point to the fact that disciplined knowledges also play a role in the continued relevance of a person’s thought. While few outside of Sociology, Geography and Demography read Ferdinand Tonnies, his thought is likely to persist for some time as is that of Emile Durkheim. Similarly, political works from the Enlightenment (Voltaire, Rousseau, and Mill) stand a very good chance of being sustained so long as Political Studies continues. What stands the likes of Nietzsche and Marx in even better stead is the fact that their thought is spread across a wide variety of disciplines each of which is melding into the multi and transdisciplinary near future. Indeed, Nietzsche is more important today than he was a century ago in academe. I daresay Derrida will be more important a century from now than he is today (and his current significance is difficult to overstate), due to his relevance to such a wide array of fields. Derrida however comes with a catch and it is a similar problem to the one I assess concerning Baudrillard’s continued relevance in Section IV.

III. Disproving Baudrillard

Among the reasons for the continued relevance of anyone’s thought has to do with its originality and its ability to survive sustained challenges without being disproved. Even after Newton, Einstein, and Hawking, Copernicus is still widely read in the sciences [and in intellectual history and the philosophy of science] because, while many knowledges have super-ceded his claims, he set in motion an entirely new view of the cosmos. Similarly, no matter how the art of painting evolves, Picasso and Braque will be remembered for inventing cubism as an entirely new way of seeing.

What sort of invention or “discovery” did Baudrillard make that is likely to carry his name far into the future? The answer to this question is the length of a book which would include chapters on his understanding of reversibility, symbolic exchange, seduction, impossible exchange, alterity, pataphysics, duality, simulation, and his overall poetic approach to thought and writing (to name only the more prominent). To take one of these by way of example let’s examine his thought concerning simulation and its probable endurance well into the future.

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 (1990a:50) and that the real “has only ever been a form of simulation” (2003:39). Between 1981 and 2000 he became the preeminent 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 (1993a:36). He also saw the emergence of the bourgeois model of social organization as a gigantic exercise in simulation (which is now attempting to globalize) (1981:41). As activism disappears into referenda, opinion poll data, blogs and tweets, Baudrillard noted that events also disappear into media coverage which scripts the event and covers the outcome before the event even takes place (1988:32). 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” (1995:23) – “a war exchanged for the signs of war” (1994b:62). It was, he said: “...war processing, the enemy appears only as a computerized target” (1995:62). 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” (2002:151). The proliferation of media simulation of events was troubling to Baudrillard precisely because 24-hour real-time coverage never ends and in-depth analysis never begins. In the case of the Gulf War we are, he said, “well along the way to confusing the war with the model of war” (1983:83-84). Here, our media, which we believe should function as a democratic mechanism of genuine information for debate, are almost entirely given over to positivity and factitiousness (1993c:44) – precisely the kind one would expect from a culture in which advertising has become an epidemic (Ibid.:4).

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:

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 (1993b:201-202).

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 (1993b:166). 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” (1994a:2) or what we could call the beginning of an endless era without foundations which many analysts have pointed toward for the past thirty years. This is also part of that very familiar feeling we share concerning the unhinging of linear continuity and the kinds of polarities essential to dialectics (Ibid.:16). Many refer to it as the postmodern but Baudrillard found this to be a hollow concept (1993b:22). One of the markers of our progression into simulation involves what he calls “the implosion of meaning” or the collapse of poles of meaning (Ibid.:31). A good example of this is contemporary politics where it is increasingly difficult to distinguish the left from the right as whichever party is in power pursues negative policies (1988:113). The art of government today – government by negative means, by deterrence – involves convincing people of their powerlessness (2002:143). It is a form of governance which well suits the 500 channel television universe, modeled and staged events, and opinion polling. It is government which befits the age of genetics – a form of simulation having reached the point of no return (1990b:172). Baudrillard thus played an equally significant role in the naming of simulation as did Newton in the naming of gravity.

Today Baudrillard says we are in a state of simulation only to the extent that we are obliged to replay all the scenarios because they have taken place already (1993c:4). Our entire system of media and information are being transformed into a gigantic machine for what he calls the “production of the event as a sign” (2001:132). If objects (and objects are at the core of our system), become signs, this is when we will be in simulation true and proper (Ibid.:129). As yet we are merely Baudrillard believes, in a time when only “the principle of simulation governs us” (1993a:2). If we were completely in simulation, according to Baudrillard, we would be in a world from which all reference has disappeared (1993b:165).

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 (1996a:72). 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.

What is properly meant by “simulation” for Baudrillard involves the effort of every systemic organization and operator (including each of us) “to put the illusion of the world to death” and to replace it with “an absolutely real world” (1996a:16). This is a vitally important contribution to philosophy made by Baudrillard – the notion that the real is not the opposite of simulation – the opposite of simulation is illusion. The “real” which is the outcome of discourse and language simulations is merely a “particular case of simulation” (Ibid.:16). If we accept that the “real” is merely a story – what we say it is based on our perceptions of the illusion behind which the real remains hidden – then this makes perfect sense.

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, Baudrillard says, that turns reality itself into one eventuality among others” (2006:92). 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 (see Baudrillard: 1997:12 ff.).

Baudrillard thus pointed to two related aspects of existence which work to keep simulation at bay: 1) the illusion of the world; and 2) a philosophy [his] that favors enigma over truth. Our first line of defense against tumbling into hyper-simulation is the discursive nature of our interaction with the world. For Baudrillard, given that illusion is the opposite of simulation, when the knowledge industries of the system present us with the demand that we produce the real (simulation) we can respond by making enigmatic that which is clear, and render unintelligible what is only too intelligible. We can make the event itself unreadable, accentuate the false transparency of the world to spread a terroristic confusion about it, and offer a radical disillusioning of the real (1996a:104). For Baudrillard the world which appears to us as enigmatic and unintelligible – is not predestined for “truth” of the kind which produces a “real” world. By seeking illusion we also seek the inner absence of everything to itself – the core of illusion (1997:49). This entails going against screen perceptions in real time which bring to us the definitive end of illusion (1996b:85). Screen culture or “tele-reality” as Baudrillard called it, attempts to end the illusion of thought, of the scene, of passion and entails the end of the illusion of the world and its vision which vanish into tele-reality, into real time, into the virtual, into the opposite of illusion (1996a:33).

And so, ironically, it is our discursive form of interaction with the world which saves us from total simulation. “Objectively”, Baudrillard writes, “the world is an illusion: it can only appear to us” (2006:62). In order to understand radical illusion Baudrillard points to an analogue from cosmology:

...the light of the stars needs a very long time to reach us; sometimes we perceive it after the star itself has disappeared. This gap between the star as a virtual source and its perception by us... is an inescapable part of the illusion of the world, the absence at the heart of the world that constitutes the illusion” (2000:71).

So illusion (the opposite of simulations of the real), has about it a very subtle reality! As Baudrillard writes elsewhere: “the fact that things are never what they seem to be or what they believe themselves to be, accordingly, the world, likewise, is never what it seems, it presents itself as one thing but is something else, the world plays with us in a manner of speaking, and we have a subjective illusion, the illusion of being a subject, whereas the objective illusion derives from the fact that the world presents itself as one thing, but it is not really this at all (1997:40). The illusion of the world cannot be dispelled (1996a:19) – from its very beginning the world has never been – as realism believes – identical with itself, never real (Ibid.:8). How could it be when we know it via language? The world is an objective illusion which entails the radical impossibility of a real presence of things or beings, their definitive absence from themselves” (2000:70).

Baudrillard, who named simulation to such an extent, also points to a method against simulation. He writes that:

the task of philosophical thought is to go to the limit of hypotheses and processes, even if they are catastrophic. The only justification for thinking and writing is that it accelerates these terminal processes. Here, beyond the discourse of truth, resides the poetic and enigmatic value of thinking. For, facing a world that is unintelligible and problematic, our task is clear: we must make that world even more unintelligible, even more enigmatic (Ibid.:83).

This understanding of philosophy is not one which seeks to be obscure or to create nonsense but is one which respects the illusion of the world over simulation. Baudrillard’s contribution to our understanding of simulation is of such magnitude that we might compare it to Newton’s theory of gravity if Newton had also been able to supply us with an understanding of how to counter gravity.

Why would such an imaginative creature as a human prefer simulation over an embrace of the illusory nature of the world? It is one of the more sublime qualities of Baudrillard’s writing that he forces us to see ourselves as occupants of an uncertain world where the real hides behind appearances (1998:110). Ours is an existence of unceasing illusion – no matter how much we embrace simulacra the illusion of the world is what prevents us from tumbling all the way into simulation. No matter how we try to perfect the world its imperfections will remain because the world is illusion. This is why Baudrillard chose to be “a weaver of illusions, if illusion is understood... as something which drives a breach into a world that is too known, too conventional, too real” (1996a:71).

While Baudrillard contributed important thought on a number of concepts his writing on simulation alone is likely to guarantee him an existence well into the future – that is, unless simulation can prove him wrong and win out. From the current vantage point, given the hermetic nature of his argument, it seems as likely that gravity will disappear. There is however one event that might lead to the disappearance of Baudrillard and I turn to it in the next section.

IV. Is Poststructuralism 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 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.

When will theorists no longer speak the name Baudrillard? I suspect that, like it or not, Baudrillard's writing will continue to be important to scholars throughout and well beyond the 21st century.

Finally, perhaps the most negative answer to the question involves the advancement of our current system: that Baudrillard's thought will be around so long as he is needed by the system. This was one of his greatest frustrations while alive – that our system is so all encompassing that one can only be critical or radical in relation to it. I suppose it is fitting that this intolerable problem follows him into death.

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