OBITUARIES

Jean Baudrillard, 1929–2007

Jean Baudrillard, who died on 6 March 2007, had been writing an obituary for quite some time. The subject was 'the real', its death long, drawn-out and agonizing. In his incisive analyses of the hyperreal state of being that, he claimed, replaced the real in our time, Baudrillard mapped out with considerable verve the 'postmodern condition'. Because of this he was at times mistakenly perceived to be more some kind of performance artist than a serious thinker. But perhaps his biggest crime was to have such an almost surrealist sense of 'black' humour, expressed in the titles of his essays and books ('Animals Sick of Surplus Value', 'Castrated Before Marriage'), as well as in the form of his arguments, shaped like a Möbius strip, in mimetic enactment of the claustrophobic world of total commutability that he described.

Born in Reims in 1929, Baudrillard developed an interest in German language and culture, studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, and eventually went on to translate, among others, the playwrights Bertolt Brecht and Peter Weiss. He taught German and sociology at the secondary-school level from 1956 to 1966, while completing his higher education at the University of Paris X–Nanterre, where he would eventually gain an academic post. In 1966 Baudrillard defended his thesis, *The System of Objects*, publishing it as a book two years later, in the year of the student uprisings in Paris. The hybrid nature of *The System of Objects* is indicative of the subsequent depth and breadth of Baudrillard's work. Yet his transdisciplinary approach ironically became, in the popular understanding, a sign of his lack of seriousness, when it should signify the opposite: a genuine search for understanding bound with a refusal to stop enjoying himself in the process. Always in the thick of things, Baudrillard nonetheless managed to occupy a marginal, liminal, virtual 'outsider' role for much of his professional life. He could appear more a trickster figure than a professor, something that he cultivated on many occasions. I once met him at the (now defunct) Compendium bookstore in Camden Town, London, wearing a thick full-length coat on an extremely hot summer's day, reading one of his works in translation while laughing loudly.

Baudrillard crossed many thresholds: attaching himself to Henri Lefebvre's Utopie group (established 1966), he later argued that he found Lefebvre's 'rhetoric… occasionally too set'. Nonetheless, the Utopie group and its journal, which brought together Hubert Tonka (Lefebvre's assistant at the Institut d'urbanisme), sociologists Catherine Cot and René Lourau, and architects Jean Aubert, Isabelle Auricoste, Jean-Paul Jungmann and Antoine Stinco, produced some wonderfully transdisciplinary work, before the notion itself became fashionable and banal. To get a true sense of the *visual* impact of these, and other early texts by Baudrillard, does involve (ironically) returning to the originals, as the English translations are stripped bare of the montages and collages to which they were originally married. This is a shame, since Baudrillard, who was reading Benjamin and the Frankfurt School some time before they became available in French translation, worked closely with image-texts throughout his life, and gained some renown as a photographer.

Much of Baudrillard's life was spent occupying and attempting to understand the 'semiosphere', whatever terms or phrases he used to conceptualize this space: the hyperreal, the end of production, virtual reality, total commutability, the dominance of the code, or simply the information-rich semiotically saturated environment of a business-class flight. One of his most important early intellectual breakthroughs came in the application of semiotic theory to the study of Marx. While Baudrillard

had already been doing this indirectly in *The System of Objects* via a rereading of Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947; revised 1958), it is articulated most powerfully in the three books that followed: *The Consumer Society* (1970), *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972) and *The Mirror of Production* (1973). Examining the constellation of consumer objects Baudrillard realized that the ideology of consumption needed structural and semiotic analysis. Rather than identifying an affluent society, he recognized an underlying logic of penury, in which urban density leads to competition rather than fulfilment of appetite or needs. Contemporary Western society is thus one of ever-receding affluence, or the perception of *scarcity*, as Marshall Sahlins argued. This paradoxical logic, while still attempting to reconcile production and the ideology of consumption, clearly disengages itself from the dominance of production per se. But Baudrillard went further, and deconstructed the entire raft of theories concerning 'needs', suggesting that they are tautological, akin to stating that a fire burns because of its 'phlogistic essence'. Objects and needs, he argued, are simply signs, representing a world of 'generalized hysteria'. But he also warned us that this exultation of signs is concomitantly a denial of real things. An amusing example, from *The Consumer Society*, is the 'Esso neo-log-fire': the log fire and barbecue kit available in car service stations designed to re-create the very mode of heating destroyed by the oil industry in the first place.
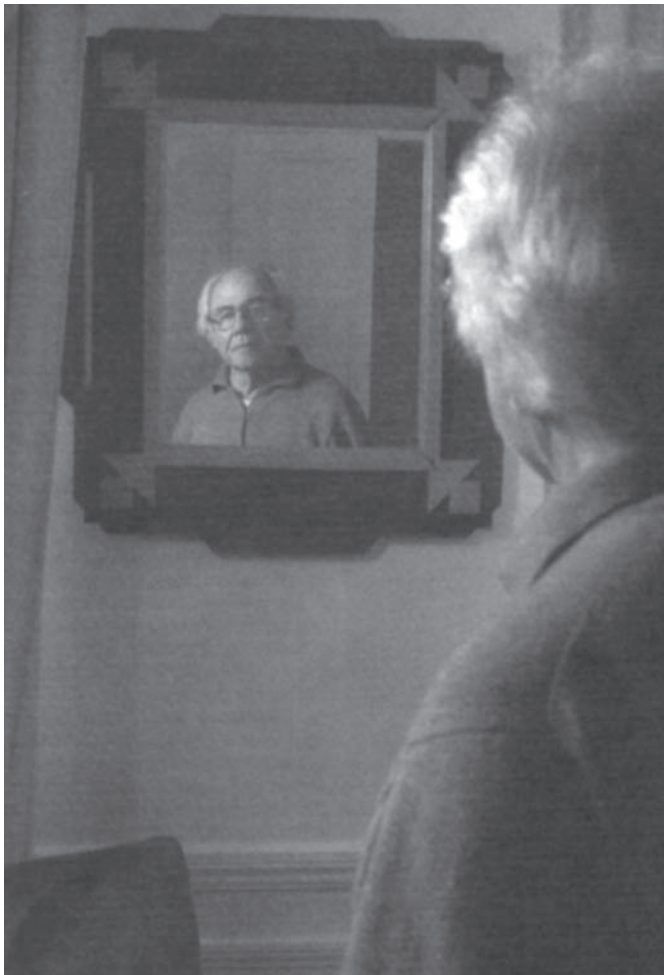
Notoriously, Baudrillard sought to deconstruct Marx by reading consumption as if it were a networked, differential sign effect, doing so most thoroughly in the (at times extremely dense) writing of *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* and *The Mirror of Production*. The concept of use-value is rejected in these works in favour of exploring the dominance of sign exchange-value that Baudrillard argued is fundamental: a theory of objects is not to be based upon needs, but what he calls social *prestations* (explained by Charles Levin as 'a feeling of obligation to an irrational code of social behaviour') and signification. Working with the examples of indigenous societies, Baudrillard argued that a sociological analysis of consumption is predicated upon replacing use-value with value generated via symbolic exchange. Thus the native potlatch is compared with conspicuous consumption in the West, including the wasting of time in leisure. Symbolic exchange, however, is a threshold process, one which is generative of the 'unique' (in symbolic exchange, say, the event or ritual of gift-giving), yet, at the same time, partakes of the arbitrariness of the sign (the gift is arbitrary, it could be *any object* given). Baudrillard thus went on to distinguish between symbolic and semiotic signs, where the latter are entirely exchangeable.

Much of this theory was mapped out in some detail before Baudrillard proceeded to his famous deconstruction of the Marxist opposition of exchange-value and use-value. More radically, in fact, in the opening chapter of *The Mirror of Production*, he sought to deconstruct the concept of labour per se, which he read as being ideological and 'interconnected with the general system of value'. Use-value, rather than being individual and concrete, is a social relation that expresses an entire 'metaphysic': it is analogous to a moral law, which regulates and establishes the 'object'. Use-value and needs appear only as 'an effect of exchange-value', just as the signified is an effect of the signifier. In other words, Baudrillard did not regard use-value or the signified as some concrete real, some 'elsewhere', that exchange value or the signifier express, represent, distort or 'translate' in a false consciousness. Instead, they are what he calls 'simulation models', constituted or 'produced by the play of exchange-value and of signifiers'. The real is that which is produced by simulation, but it is also that which is foreclosed: it will come to haunt the hyperreal like an impossible and ungraspable shadow, one which will become most obvious via powerful symbolic acts, such as revolutionary uprisings or terrorist acts. In this sense, the 'real' was a word that Baudrillard placed invisibly 'under erasure', to use a term more familiar from Derrida. Perhaps if Baudrillard had

left visible the deconstructive marks of the cross placed through the word, its use would not have led to mistaken charges of nostalgia.

What Baudrillard meant by hyperreality was often misunderstood in turn: in *The Perfect Crime*, Baudrillard makes clear that the hyperreal is that which both expels the real and then masks its 'disappearance'. It could be argued that Baudrillard's deconstruction of Marx shifts the notion of the real from that of negation – the dialectical understanding of the real – to that of a new 'positivity', a non-teleological, non-dialectical dwelling in a productive realm of illusion. At any rate, much of Baudrillard's work explored this dwelling, its frightening consequences, its ironies and contradictions.

The opposing forces or intensities of the real and the hyperreal are given form in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976). The symbolic is outside of the semiotic system of exchange, and it has a magical, mystical power; yet the system can use the symbolic gift-without-return in the ironic 'gifts' of work, consumption, media and the social, all experienced as a positivity without recourse to dialectical critique. The only point of intervention, therefore, is to proffer a gift to which the system cannot respond, except via its own catastrophic collapse and death. This point would be developed in myriad ways in Baudrillard's later writings, in part because this 'collapse' would appear to be more of a temporary rift or rupture in the hyperreal, one which would almost immediately undergo a process of commodification and introjection. The hostage thus functions in the symbolic rupture of the terrorist attack, where he or she is suspended beyond the normal rules of exchange. Baudrillard argued that, in this sense, entire nations can be held hostage – for example, the German people under Hitler, or virtually the entire planet under the Cold War. 'We' are all subject to terrorism. Hyperreality thus appears as beyond good and evil: the work of the terrorist is to return society to the metaphysical world of ethical structures and events. But this is a fantasy, an impossibility, since the symbolic force of terrorism is that of total disruption (not moral or existential realignment), a temporary vacuum of state power, followed by a increased strengthening of the state apparatus via a reduction of human rights and freedoms.

In some of Baudrillard's later work, such as the essays on the attack on the World Trade Center in New York, his arguments can appear strangely harmless, even retrograde, whereas earlier statements, such as the infamous claim that 'the Gulf War is not taking place', caused much more of a productive stir. One cannot but help imagine that the Pentagon spent many productive hours studying their Baudrillard between Gulf Wars I and II, with the ironic outcome that the transition from 9/11 to Afghanistan and Gulf War II was almost shamelessly seamless. However, Baudrillard himself was always committed not just to an intellectual understanding of the hyperreal, but to one based firmly upon a dedicated experiential account. While *Rolling Stone* journalists headed out to Vietnam, Baudrillard did something that, from a French perspective, was equally daring: he travelled to Las Vegas

and the suburbs of California. Criss-crossing America on the ground and in the air, Baudrillard would produce some of his wittiest *and* most annoying texts. America was 'utopia achieved' and what a frightening place that turned out to be. Yet his love–hate relationship with the place (or at least his fantasy of the place: and what other way is there of experiencing it?) was finally more love than hate.

Nonetheless, some of the most humorous episodes occurred to him back home, such as his 'little catastrophe scenario' in which he loses his passport at the police station where he is reporting the loss of his identity papers. Told that a passport is not 'a true certification of existence' but merely a transit document, in the process Baudrillard discovers that his car was reported stolen four years previously and that he has therefore been driving around in a 'stolen' car with no identity papers. But there is a happy ending to this story: not only does the fact of his car being 'stolen' cancel all of his traffic offences during this period, but his documents are returned – in duplicate.

In books such as *America* (1986) and the various volumes of *Cool Memories* (first volume 1987), Baudrillard's writing adopts an aphoristic form. The translated Baudrillard was often available in gnomic or miniaturized form, such as the Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, and it is in his essays that he was frequently at his most controversial as well as exhilarating. But his vision here is also dark, as he adumbrates the 'code' that generates the hyperreal, or copy-without-an-original – the DNA of genetic engineering; the binary code of televisual and computerized virtual realities (the McLuhanesque 'medium is the message/massage' perhaps more relevantly rewritten as the 'medium is the masturbatory message/massage'); the viral economy or codes of AIDS, stock-market crashes, and computer viruses; the codified world debt/Internet information stockpile, both of which are inexpiable. It is the excessiveness of the code that is part of the problem: the code precedes, produces, and thereby obliterates the original. As he concluded in *The Vital Illusion* (2000), in what perhaps constitutes the conclusion to his entire work: 'Everything will be preceded by its virtual realization. We are dealing with an attempt to construct an entirely positive world, a perfect world, expurgated of every illusion, of every sort of evil and negativity, exempt from death itself. This pure, absolute reality, this unconditional realization of the world – this is what I call the Perfect Crime.'

Richard J. Lane

Seduction, death and dandyism

Marvel Comic hero Captain America was shot dead by a sniper as he entered New York's Federal Court House on 7 March. He was facing trial for defying a Superhero registration law, passed after another Superhero's battle with a villain resulted in a 9/11-like catastrophe that left hundreds of civilians (most of them children) dead. Many Superheros, including Captain America, had initially defied the law, and a civil war threatened. The Captain's decision to turn himself in and to reveal his true identity to the authorities was an attempt to defuse the situation. Asked to comment on the obvious parallel between this narrative, 9/11, the Patriot Act and the war against terror, the president of Marvel Comics was quoted by CNN as saying: 'Every child knew about 9/11. If [he] could see a TV he knew what 9/11 was. The other similarities to things going on are just part of storytelling.'

Jean Baudrillard would have loved this story but did not live to read it, having died in Paris at the age of seventy-seven the day before the news broke. The *Daily Telegraph*'s Sam Leith (12 March) found the coincidence highly amusing – the death of the critic of America's hyperreality coincided with the death of one of its defenders

and symbols – and for once it was difficult not to join in the tasteless laughter and *Schadenfreude* that has so often accompanied the death of intellectuals (*The Australian*'s obituary was actually headlined 'Death of a Clown'). It was tempting to joke that it was only a simulacrum that had died a simulated death. The *Guardian's* obituary (Steven Poole, 8 March) began with a parody of the title of the deceased's most notorious book: 'Jean Baudrillard's death did not take place. "Dying is pointless," he once wrote, "you have to know how to disappear".' Rereading the music reviews a couple of days later, I found myself wondering why Baudrillard never wrote anything on Dolly Parton – a simulacrum (a copy without an original) if ever there was one and, moreover, a simulacrum who knows that she is a simulacrum.

Baudrillard was neither a Marvel Comics Superhero nor a dumb blonde confident in the knowledge that she is neither dumb nor a blonde, but it is surprisingly difficult to say just who and what he was. He gave little away and said little about himself, presumably in the belief that doing so would be as pointless as dying. The smile remained enigmatic to the end. Baudrillard is usually described as 'a sociologist', but he was a sociologist who showed little concern for Durkheim's beloved 'social facts' (preferably *sui generis*) or for the rules of any sociological method. Sociology was in fact a second career. Baudrillard studied German at the Sorbonne and taught German language and literature in secondary schools from 1957 onwards, before obtaining a post in sociology at the new University of Nanterre in 1965. Three years later, Nanterre became the powder keg that exploded into May '68, but Baudrillard remained characteristically vague about his role (if any) in *les événements*. The shift from German to sociology was apparently made at the suggestion of Henri Lefebvre. It was under Lefebvre's guidance that Baudrillard wrote *The System of Objects* (1968) based on his thesis: his first book, published at the age of forty. Baudrillard once told the *Nouvel Observateur* that he began to think 'relatively late in life' and that, given his qualifications, sociology was the only discipline that remained open to him. In 1965, sociology was indeed a marginal discipline in France and in many ways it still is. There is no *agrégation* in sociology, and the best-known French sociologists tend, like Bourdieu, to have a background in philosophy. Baudrillard did not have a classic academic career, and it was only in 1986 that he achieved the rank of *directeur scientifique* at the University of Paris–X (Dauphine).

There is, however, perhaps one sense in which Baudrillard did exemplify aspects of a classic sociological tradition, which has often been steeped in a theoretical melancholy. Weber worried about the disenchantment of the world, Durkheim at once welcomed modernity's promotion of a liberating individualism and feared the 'suicidogenic' anomie that came in its wake. Baudrillard often appears to have transposed this pessimism to a hypermodernity, and to have refined it into a bleak and cold cynicism.

The obvious starting point for Baudrillard's initial work on objects and consumerism appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s, just as France began to be annexed by the consumer society. It is no accident that his *Système des objets* (1970) ends with a reading of George Perec's novel *Les Choses* (1965), in which the couple known collectively as 'Jérôme-et-Sylvie' (they have no individuality, either nominal or existential) define themselves solely through the objects they consume. It is not difficult to read this little fable and Baudrillard's essay as an extension of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism crossed with Debord's description of the society of the spectacle and Barthes's lacerating critique of the mythologies of everyday life: the signs cease to be signs *of* anything (and still less *to* anything), and consumerism is the activity of systematically manipulating those signs. Although this problematic remains constant throughout much of Baudrillard's later work, it is also supplemented (or gradually replaced) by a sociology or anthropology of the sacred derived mainly from Mauss's work on the gift relationship and Bataille's notion of the 'accursed share'. The emphasis is no longer

on production or even consumption, but on a surplus that cannot be disposed of. Once signs and symbols no longer signify, there can be no symbolic reciprocity: the gift cannot be returned, and the surplus cannot be consumed in a potlatch ceremony. By the mid-1980s, Baudrillard reached a stark conclusion: 'critical radicality has become useless' (*Les Stratégies fatales*). By now, 'the real' had been reduced to a 'referential illusion'. If critique becomes impossible, all we can do is watch.

Baudrillard had many talents, including for photography, which he took up relatively late in life. His photographs never show people, but rather the absence of a human presence, and look strangely like some of the paintings of Edward Hopper. He also had a talent for provocation that infuriated many people. The notorious comments in *America* (1986) on the beauty of the idea of sacrificing a woman in the American desert did little to recommend him to feminists. The French gay and lesbian magazine *Têtu* marked his death by recalling the homophobic remarks made in *Écran Total* (1997) about AIDS ('an epidemic of self-defence' on nature's part) and homosexuality itself ('Those who live by the same shall perish by the same'). Even greater offence was caused by the seeming defiance of reality in the three essays on the Gulf War, which was 'not going to take place' 'was not taking place' and 'did not take place'. Such comments do appear to defy common sense and have usually been read as such, but they may not be quite as counter-intuitive as they seem. Baudrillard was always a witty and allusive writer, and the prophecy that the Gulf War would not take place alludes to Jean Giraudoux's play *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place* (1935), which ends, of course, with the Greek army setting off for Troy.

Baudrillard's analysis of the Gulf War conflict is not without its acuity: it 'ended' (only to begin again) with a 'defeated' Saddam Hussein still in power and his elite Republican Guard intact and poised to massacre insurgents who had been encouraged to rise up by the 'victors'. Since then we have watched armies shelling a mountain range (shades of Conrad) in the vain hope of killing an individual who is allegedly responsible for every calamitous act of terrorism that occurs anywhere. And we can now watch a war (or non-war) that began in Iraq *after* a coalition victory had been claimed by George Bush. These are indeed wars in which the virtual and the real become indistinguishable. Pilots trained in virtual environments fly combat missions without being able to see anything but the headup displays projected onto screens in their cockpits. Ground troops inflict on their prisoners pornographic humiliations learned from websites or magazines, and use mobile phones to photograph them. The point of the humiliation and the torture is not to extract intelligence, but to capture an image. The unmanned drones that gather data and acquire targets all over the Middle East are controlled from somewhere just outside Los Angeles. The comments on 9/11 were even more offensive to many. Baudrillard remarked that the terrorists *did* it, but we *wished for it*. And Hollywood has dreamed of it in countless movies: New York and Los Angeles have been destroyed again and again. We love watching those movies.

Ultimately, Baudrillard's stance is very much that of the dandy: cold and even cynical, he watches. A neo-Baudelairean flâneur speeds across a (white) America in a fast car, polishing glacial aphorisms as he goes. Dandyism has its attractions (though they may well be gender-specific), but it dehumanizes both reader and writer. Yes, a global superpower was wounded on 9/11, but can we forget the firefighters (and the passengers of United Flight 93)? They were not playing walk-on parts in a spectacle. Baudrillard's observations about the virtuality of postmodern warfare are not inaccurate but they fail to address the non-virtuality of its outcome. The sabot-discarding armour-piercing round (probably tipped with depleted uranium) hits the front of the turret and the tank crew die in a hellish flood of molten metal. The armour that was designed to protect them disintegrates and helps only to kill them.

David Macey