THE AUSTRALIAN
Australia's national daily newspaper

Features;**Obituary**

Theorist upset lazy thinking

Rex Butler

MATP
1,248 palabras
9 de marzo de 2007
The Australian
1 - All-round Country
16
inglés

OBITUARY

Jean Baudrillard, the postmodern agent provocateur of French sociology, died in Paris this week.

Rex Butler unravels his theories

Jean Baudrillard
Sociologist, cultural critic.
Born Reims, France, June 20, 1929.
Died Paris, March 6, aged 77.

JEAN Baudrillard once wrote: "Some know how to slip away at the appropriate moment. Their death is a stroke of cleverness: it makes the world more enigmatic, more difficult to understand than it was when they were alive, which is the true task of thought."

In the light of Baudrillard's own death this week from cancer, it is tempting to see these remarks as prescient, as providing some fitting epitaph to his life, even as autobiographical.

But, in doing so, we would be doing exactly what Baudrillard cautions us against: restoring a kind of

meaning to the world, as though death were a final reward or end point towards which we strive, as though the aim of life were to produce a beautiful death.

It is against these habits and lazinesses of thought that Baudrillard fought his whole life, including in his magnum opus, Symbolic Exchange and Death (1976), which is explicitly directed against any attempt to make death a stopping point, some principle of meaning or judgment to hold against the fundamental reversibility and uncertainty of the world. Baudrillard's career was an attempt to upset so-called common sense not, as he was often accused of doing, for mischievous or nihilistic reasons -- late in life, with regard to his controversial remarks about 9/11, he insisted he was a man of the Enlightenment -- but as part of the relentless search for truth.

Baudrillard was born in 1929 in the northern French city of Reims. His parents came from peasant stock and he was the first of his family to go to university. He originally studied as a Germanist -- Friedrich Nietzsche was perhaps his most abiding philosophical influence -- and he began his career the way so many of the greatest French minds do, teaching in high schools.

Later he returned to university to study sociology, and completed a thesis with the eminent sociologist of everyday life, Henri Lefebvre, at the University of Paris X, Nanterre in 1966. Soon after, he began to teach at the same university, peripheral by French standards, where he was to remain until 1987, when he retired early to concentrate on his writing and to undertake the worldwide schedule of lectures that were the result of his growing intellectual celebrity.

His thesis was turned into his first book, The System of Objects, published in 1968. It combines the satirist's sharp eye for the absurdities of human behaviour with the imposing armature of structural linguistics in seeking to show that modern consumers do not so much use objects as employ them to signal to others who and what they are.

His observation of the way we use wood veneer in interior decoration as a way of declaring our affinity to nature is as pertinent as ever in a world of environmentally friendly packaging and free range animal produce.

In The Consumer Society, written two years later, Baudrillard investigates further our contemporary situation, in which consumption is a matter not of the satisfaction of any underlying need but of a socially regulated system of desires.

Here too there is a profound critique not only of economic rationalism, for Baudrillard shows how waste functions as an essential component of any economic system, but also of those critics of immoral

consumption, for his point is that there is no good consumption, no longer any actual identifiable need for most of the things we buy.

It is by pushing to the limit the ideas of a language of objects and the untethering of consumption from need that Baudrillard in the mid-1970s came upon the concept for which he is best known: simulation. It is fundamentally the notion that, in our modern society with its ubiquitous media, reality is not natural but produced, brought about as an effect of its representation.

Simulation is not at all, despite persistent misunderstandings of it, a denial of reality or a form of philosophical idealism. Indeed, if anything, Baudrillard's argument is that we are suffering not from a lack of reality but from too much reality. It is the strange and paradoxical thought that, the more our modern systems of representation make the world over in their image, the less we seem to know about it, the more unpredictable its behaviour appears.

There seems to be some inbuilt resistance on the part of the world to being realised by our systems of rationality, to being shaped to our human purposes.

Take, for instance, those masses who are the incessant subject of polls and advertising. Despite enormous resources being devoted to shaping and second-guessing their desires and motivations, they continue to behave in seemingly random and uncontrollable ways. Think of the recent shift of voters away from John Howard and towards Kevin Rudd: there is no rational reason why people should suddenly change within a week their opinion as to which party is best able to lead Australia, except as an act of unconscious revenge against the political class itself.

Contentiously, regarding 9/11, Baudrillard wanted to argue that the West will never defeat Islamic fundamentalism precisely because it is the consequence of American superiority, the lack of alternatives to the new world order. The more successful the war on terror is in defeating terrorists, the more terrorists will be produced.

These are undoubtedly difficult and enigmatic ideas, empirically indefensible and yet with extraordinary predictive effects.

It was Baudrillard who back in 1981 spoke of New York's twin towers as the epitome of everything the West stood for.

It was Baudrillard who in 1991 proposed that the first Gulf War did not take place: a conclusion seemingly shared by George W. Bush, who felt impelled to complete what his father left undone.

It would be too much to say that Baudrillard, despite writing 50 books about sociology, anthropolgy, media studies and the arts and humanities more generally, had enormous influence in these fields.

He remained far too antagonistic a thinker to permit the kinds of reductions and simplifications that allow real influence.

In the late '80s he was lionised by the New York art world but he rejected it. In the late '90s, he was acknowledged by the Wachowski brothers as the inspiration for the feature film The Matrix, but he famously criticised it.

Certainly in Australia in the early '80s, Baudrillard spoke to a generation of young scholars in the humanities, allowing them to escape the stifling ideology critique or political correctness of their '60s-era teachers. He opened up wider conceptions of feminism, the visual arts and of cultural practice in general.

He visited this country on several occasions, most notably in 1984 at the height of his celebrity, when he delivered a lecture on cinema to a packed lecture theatre that irrevocably changed the terms of intellectual debate here.

He would doubtless like us not to know what his death means or what the final meaning or destiny of his work will be. His passing has made the world seem more enigmatic, as indeed did his coming.

Baudrillard is survived by his wife, Marine, and two children from a previous marriage.

Rex Butler lectures in art history at the University of Queensland.

[AUS_T-20070309-1-016-123571]

Photo

Documento AUSTLN0020070308e33900022

