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News:

Obituary of Jean Baudrillard French social theorist whose theory of hyperreality sprang from, and had an enormous impact on, popular culture

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JEAN BAUDRILLARD, who died on Tuesday aged 77, was a leading post-modernist thinker and social theorist best known for his concept of "hyperreality" - the theory that modern man can no longer tell what reality is because he has become lost in a world of "simulacra", images and signs created and presented as "real" by the mass media; many regarded him as the most important French philosopher of the last 50 years.

In fact Baudrillard was not the first to come up with this idea - or something like it. In the 18th century, Bishop Berkeley had theorised that all that individuals know about an object or an event is their perception of it, a perception placed in their mind by God. More than a century later Berkeley's thought experiment was summarised in limerick form by Ronald Knox: There was a young man who said "God/ Must think it exceedingly odd/ If he finds that this tree/ Continues to be/ When there's no one about in the Quad", to which the reply ran: "Dear Sir, your astonishment's odd: I am always about in the Quad/ And that's why this tree/ Will continue to be/ Since observed by Yours faithfully, God."

Baudrillard's theory was similar except that God's place was taken by the mass media, his contention being that if we live in a Disneyesque world in which our understanding is shaped by media-driven signs, and the tools of historical intelligibility have disappeared, how can we tell what is real - if indeed there is any such thing as reality? This essentially nihilist outlook led Baudrillard to some startling conclusions, such as that encapsulated in the title of his 1991 book The Gulf War Did Not Happen. The war, he claimed, really existed only on a symbolic level since neither side could claim victory, nothing had changed politically in Iraq, and the conflict itself was largely a staged set-piece "video game" of computer

effects and CNN graphics. More controversial still was his contention, in an essay entitled The Spirit of Terrorism: Requiem for the Twin Towers (2002), that the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York were largely a "dark fantasy" manufactured by the media. While terrorists had committed the atrocity, he wrote, they were only putting the finishing touches to "the orgy of power, liberation, flows and calculation which the twin towers embodied". The horror of the victims in the towers, he wrote, "was inseparable from the horror of living in them". The article provoked a predictable outcry. "It takes a real demonic genius," wrote one critic, "to brush off the slaughter of thousands on the grounds that they were suffering from severe ennui brought on by boring modern architecture."

Baudrillard had a genius for gnomic utterances such as "God exists, but I don't believe in him"; "I feel like a witness to my own absence"; and "The sad thing about artificial intelligence is that it lacks artifice, and therefore intelligence." Critics complained that his complexities amounted to pretentious gibberish and dismissed him as a charlatan - or at best an ironic postmodern joke. But others regarded him as a thinker of striking originality who did more than anyone to reflect the dislocating realities of modern consumer culture.

Baudrillard became the subject of numerous dissertations and was one of the five or six most cited figures in the academic firmament. He also became a cult hero to neo-pop artists of the 1980s and 1990s, providing them with a new jargon to explain their work. His theory that modern reality consisted of little more than "simulacra" seemed to justify the theory that art has no purpose beyond its own promotion; in deference to the theory, artists such as Peter Halley and Alan McCollum devoted acres of canvas to works of "simulation". When Baudrillard appeared at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1987, a journalist reported that "collectors, dealers and artists turned out in droves, as for the Messiah". In the science fiction film The Matrix, which was much influenced by his theories, the hero hides illegal computer programmes in a hollowed-out copy of Baudrillard Simulacra and Simulation. But amid all the fuss, Baudrillard remained calm and disengaged. "I keep a distance from the world which, for me, is not truly real," he explained, "so the happiness which I can have in it is not necessarily real."

The grandson of peasants and the son of civil servants, Jean Baudrillard was born at Rheims, northern France, on July 29 1929. After leaving the local secondary school, he went to Paris for a year's intensive study at the Lycée Henri IV. He studied German at the Sorbonne, after which he found work as a German teacher in lycées. At the same time he produced French translations of poetry by Berthold Brecht and plays by Peter Weiss and also wrote essays and reviews for the radical journal Les Temps Modernes.

In the 1960s he converted to Sociology, completing a doctoral thesis in 1966 on The System of Objects under Henri Lefebvre. In this, he suggested that modern industrial consumerism constituted a system under which, like pornography, material goods shape the very needs they fulfil, exploiting the fact that

there is no limit to consumption and that the urge to consume always leaves people feeling unsatisfied. The thesis won Baudrillard a post as a teaching assistant at the University of Paris at Nanterre, where he eventually became an assistant professor of Sociology. Though he never joined a political party, his Marxist views led him to support the rioting students who, in May 1968, nearly toppled Charles de Gaulle's government.

Baudrillard developed the themes of his doctoral thesis, published in 1968, in The Consumer Society (1970) in which he defined consumer goods as creating a "jungle where the new savage of modern times has trouble finding the reflexes of civilisation". In For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (1972), he argued that in our consumer society, words and signs had become a system of social management, whose power over our lives could only be broken by "total revolution".

In his next book, The Mirror of Production (1973), Baudrillard renounced his early Marxism, suggesting that Marx's theory of workers becoming "alienated" from the means of production was rooted in the tenets of 19th-century capitalism and that, in consequence, his theory of political economy was irrelevant to the 20th century. He did a similar hatchet job on structuralism in Forget Foucault (1977). In Symbolic Exchange and Death (1976) he sought to describe the contemporary era as a time in which society's attempts to deny the existence of death had made it a "state of abnormality", even as it left its symbolic mark everywhere. It was in this work that he first came up with the concept of hyperreality, and that media and technology-driven culture is manipulated by "simulacra" which combine the real and imaginary.

He developed these ideas in Simulacra and Simulation (1981), in which he suggested that in today's society what is real is no longer of primary importance. Disneyland, for example, is presented as imaginary "in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation". Thus, events such as murders, hijackings and natural disasters only become "real" to us when they are interpreted as such through the media.

In the 1980s Baudrillard began to travel to see the world about which he had theorised. In America (1986) he argued that the country's "resort-style civilisation", with its microwaves, waste disposal units and the "orgasmic elasticity" of its carpets, "irresistibly evokes the end of the world".

Baudrillard left his post at the University of Paris in 1987 and the same year published Cool Memories 1980-1985, a collection of reflections on modern culture. This was followed by a sequel, Cool Memories II (1990) then Illusion of the End (1992), in which he suggested that the way the media reports events such as the fall of Communism had, in effect, led to a reversal of history. Events such as the Cold War and the ideological revolutions of the 20th century were being effaced from the collective memory as if they had

never happened: e_SDLqthe opposite of the traditional ruse in history, in which essential changes come about unnoticed."

A stocky, rumpled, bespectacled figure who smoked fat hand-rolled cigarettes, Baudrillard saw himself, charmingly, if paradoxically, as a "simple man" whose basic impulses were a dislike of culture and a love of fast cars. In later life he developed an interest in photography and his work was shown at public exhibitions.

His flat in Montparnasse was adorned with 50 television sets and photographic images of the United States. Though he seemed to regard America as the apotheosis of hyperreality, he nevertheless found it "much more alive" than Paris. He might have appreciated the fact that he died the day before the Marvel comic strip character Captain America was killed off.

Jean Baudrillard was twice married and had two children.

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