

THE INDEPENDENT

OBITUARIES

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

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909 palabras

9 de marzo de 2007

The Independent

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OBITUARIES | ‘Outlaw’ cultural theorist

Jean Baudrillard, the French writer of brilliantly discomfiting books such as *Simulacres et Simulation* (1981, translated into English as *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1994), in his many publications challenged and extended the fissures, contradictions, extremes and ironies in culture and society. He dies at a time when his work is perhaps at its least fashionable, but most important.

Born in the year of the Great Depression – or what he saw as the “first great crash in values” – Baudrillard devoted his work to our present, chronic collapse, which for him was more a problem of a dramatic but unnoticed transformation in our relationship to a “new global order”, a world in which the cult of production – of meaning and reality more than economic wealth or consumer objects – had saturated all aspects of life. Baudrillard’s version of our universe is one where codes and signs coercively produce and designate our societies and cultures as simulations that produce our versions of reality.

Jean Baudrillard’s intellectual odyssey found its way through the enclosed but combative Parisian academic community of the 1960s. Myths abound from this period of Baudrillard’s early tenure as an assistant and researcher in the field of sociology. It seems he flourished in this hothouse of new ideas, although, unlike many of his colleagues, he did not seek to affiliate himself with the more direct brands of revolutionary thought – neo-Marxism, Maoism, Situationism – that had swept through the universities and culminated in the events of May 1968. Instead, he worked and published in the margins, under more

established figures – Roland Barthes, Henri Lefebvre, Pierre Bourdieu – while not directly associating himself with a movement or discipline.

His writings from the period demonstrate a desire to draw together the dominant strands of thought: semiology, poststructuralism and brands of psychoanalysis and anthropology. In works such as the elegantly titled *Pour Une Critique de l'économie politique du signe* (1972; *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 1981), the collected essays of *La Société de consommation* (1970; *The Consumer Society*, 1997) and *Le Système des objets* (1968; *The System of Objects*, 1996), he emerged as an important critic of a world of consumer objects that “quite tyrannically induce categories of people”.

When I interviewed him in 1995 he said, rather melancholically, that he had no more friends in Paris, by which he meant that he had become an “intellectual outlaw” – a thinker detached from the academic establishment. Three publications in the 1970s had forged Baudrillard’s reputation as a thinker beyond the limit of prevailing ideas.

The first, *Le Miroir de la production* (1973; *The Mirror of Production*, 1975), took on Karl Marx. In characteristic fashion, Baudrillard saw Marxist thought as part of the problem it sought to theorise: Marx simply universalised or replicated bourgeois notions of the market and capitalist ideology, and effectively fetishised the idea of work. Then Baudrillard delivered the bombshell *Oublier Foucault* (1977; *Forget Foucault*, 1987), an assault on one of the most influential writers of that generation. Michel Foucault had chosen not to read the draft Baudrillard sent him, but when it was published he was furious (“Foucault is the last great dinosaur of the classical age,” said Baudrillard).

Baudrillard had written off Foucault’s idea of “power” as simply a redundant notion. All formerly secure terms, such as “desire”, “reality”, “truth”, were now targeted, and the trio of categorical crimes against thought was completed when *De la séduction* (1979; *Seduction*, 1990) emerged. This publication, which has recently been reassessed as the first “post-post-feminist” text, exemplifies Baudrillard’s technique of looking at society from another side, emphasising what he called “reversibility” – in this case the gendered triumph of apparent “objects” over the attempts of subjects who wish to control them.

In the early 1990s, the backlash against so-called “postmodern theory” (of which Baudrillard was never a part) became popular in the press, and conservatives and radicals condemned Baudrillard in equal measure. Many critics accused him of being wilfully obscure, and irresponsible – a kind of intellectual playboy whose work was simply a special effect that exacerbated rather than alleviated our symptoms. But Baudrillard’s project was never concerned with providing answers or antidotes, and he was always puzzled when he was called to account.

For example, when he published his book *Amérique* (1986; *America*, 1988), he was castigated for its failure to represent the actualities of the United States. His response to accusations that he had failed to represent issues of racial conflict was that it was not the America he had sought to represent. He always thought of phenomena at another level, and was not allied to the mission to seek out and determine social or other truths.

In the late 1980s he appeared at the ICA in London for a book launch. Academics and the press wanted something from him; the queue of young postmodernists put such pressure on the event that the overspill had to be absorbed into a room next to the “real” show, with his talk relayed via a monitor. Everyone was captivated. Baudrillard greeted the idea with his usual shrug and “Pourquoi pas?” This reduplication of an event within an event, which dismantled the idea of the event, struck me as perhaps the most Baudrillardian experience one could have.

Jean Baudrillard, philosopher, social theorist and photographer: born Reims, France 29 July 1929; twice married (two children); died Paris 6 March 2007.

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