

Baudrillard is Dead: Long Live Theory!

By Steve Redhead

Jean Baudrillard, who was born in 1929 and died from cancer in March 2007, was perhaps the most controversial theorist of all global intellectuals. He was known for his trenchant analyses of media and technological communication but few commentators have actually read exactly what he wrote and taken into account when he wrote it. Belonging to the now passed on generation of radical French thinkers that included Gilles Deleuze, Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, as well as his long time friend Paul Virilio who survives him, Jean Baudrillard has often been savagely vilified by his detractors, but the lasting influence of his work on critical thought, cultural politics, war studies, media events and pop culture is impossible to deny. The general public might recognize his name from The Matrix movies, which claimed to be based on 'Baudrillardian' ideas and even featured his work onscreen. The actors were given Baudrillard to read as preparation. Baudrillard, typically, denied that the filmmakers had got things correct! The conflict over Baudrillard's legacy stems largely from the fact that a comprehensive selection of his writings had, until recently, to be properly translated from the original French. People tended to read only 'fragments' of his often fragmentary, aphoristic, cryptic work, or else quote his myriad interpreters who usually had an axe to grind.

Towards the end of the noughties is an opportune time to take a fresh look at Jean Baudrillard. On reality TV, celebrity culture, suburban riots and 'war pornography' like Abu Ghraib, Baudrillard was the one global theorist who, in often obscure ways, made perfect sense of the 'famous for being famous' world we find ourselves inhabiting in the short twenty-first century. He often referred in his writings to Loft Story, the French reality TV show, and the more

we watched the constructed reality of Big Brother, I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here and Celebrity Big Brother the more Baudrillard's words rang true. His big idea was that 'the real' has become transformed in such a way that as the virtual takes over, the real, in its simulation, has scooped up its own images; for Baudrillard the real can no longer be thought separately from the image. In what might be called a commitment to a critical poetics of the modern object, Jean Baudrillard consistently strived to produce a radically uncertain picture of the modern world. But this is a modernity that has changed over the years he has been writing about it since the early 1950s.

Who was Jean Baudrillard, the infamous theorist of simulation and the 'murder of the real'? A couple of years before he died Baudrillard insisted 'what I am, I don't know. I am the simulacrum of myself'. Jean Baudrillard, the simulacrum, is certainly a singular object. As he emphasised 'you must create your underground because now there's no more underground, no more avant-garde, no more marginality. You can create your personal underground, your own black hole, your own singularity'. Hardly a champion of organised political parties, Baudrillard was an individual dissent machine, a major international theorist who boasted a back catalogue stretching over six decades and an online journal devoted to 'Baudrillard Studies'. The International Journal of Baudrillard Studies (IJBS) featured Jean Baudrillard himself on the editorial board. It is still freely available on the internet by clicking on <http://www.ubishops.ca/BaudrillardStudies> and hosts some of the myriad obituaries as well as translations of his work and essays on theory inspired by Baudrillard. Once the ghoulish media obsession with Baudrillard's demise

has faded his texts will be read even more than when he was alive. Just before his death, Baudrillard's own disappearance was foreshadowed. In late 2006 he was due to speak twice within a couple of months. In fact his terminal illness prevented Baudrillard from travelling from France to Britain. The media reception of his impending appearances was interesting. Reporting his 'in conversation' with Semiotext(e)'s Sylvère Lotringer on the subject 'Art Beyond Art' at the annual Frieze Art Fair in London the organisers noted that Baudrillard was 'the most important intellectual working today: an icon. If you ask any young artist who is the most important writer on sociology or philosophy, they will tell you Baudrillard. He is very au courant, from what he says about politics to what's happening in art practice'. At the same time Baudrillard's attendance at an international academic conference at Swansea University in Wales was eagerly awaited. 'Engaging Baudrillard', a title pregnant with double meaning, was attended by a hundred speakers from all over the world representing various theoretical persuasions. Topics for sessions ranged from 'Baudrillard and the Art Conspiracy' through 'Baudrillard's Taste' to 'Baudrillard's Sense of Humour'. Unfortunately Baudrillard had to give apologies in advance and the Jean Baudrillard Plenary session had to be presented (by Mike Gane, an excellent academic commentator on Baudrillard) in absentia. The topic? 'On Disappearance'!

Baudrillard, as ever, remained elusive. In 2001, after producing what he called a 'requiem for the twin towers', he was nominated for 'Most Despicable Quote in the Wake of September 11'. He has been described as merely 'an overrated French theorist', a 'political idiot', and a 'philosopher clown', the 'high priest of postmodernism' and, more damagingly, as one of the notorious

‘intellectual impostors’ who write ‘fashionable nonsense’. True or false? Whatever we think, Baudrillard was in many ways his own worst enemy. In 2005 Baudrillard published, in co-operation with the London Institute of Pataphysics, a 14 page, 55 year old text by his younger self from 1952. It was put out in a limited edition (177 numbered copies, 44 signed by Baudrillard) entitled ‘Pataphysics’, packaged in a special handmade cover. Pataphysics was a text he had actually penned in the 1950s when he was in his early 20s. Pataphysics, defined by its late nineteenth century founder Albert Jarry as the science of imaginary solutions, has always been a thread in Baudrillard’s thinking from young man to old, and Jarry’s pranksterism endured for Baudrillard who has admitted to using absolutely imaginary quotations in his writings and finding such practice hilarious.

There are many examples of Baudrillard’s unusual, quirky, personal practices. For example, football-loving Jean Baudrillard devotees can still buy, wear and read the special T-shirt made by the Philosophy Football company (London based ‘sporting outfitters of intellectual distinction’ clickable on the web at www.philosophyfootball.com). The shirt is ‘Chelsea’ blue, with the number 3 and the name Baudrillard on the back, and a Baudrillard quotation, on the front. The words ‘Power is only too happy to make football bear a diabolical responsibility for stupefying the masses’ are emblazoned on it. The full, original Baudrillard quotation is in fact slightly more unwieldy: ‘Power is only too happy to make football bear a facile responsibility, even to take upon itself the diabolical responsibility for stupefying the masses’, a typically ‘singular’ sentence taken from Baudrillard’s little black book published in 1983 by

Semiotext(e) called 'In The Shadow of the Silent Majorities', but originally published in French in 1978, the year of the football World Cup in the military dictatorship of Argentina, the land of 'the disappeared'. At his wedding to second wife Marine in the late 1990s, when he was well into his 60s, the ushers were kitted out with brand new Baudrillard Philosophy Football T-shirts at Jean Baudrillard's own expense. In the mid 1970s a Cleveland punk band emerged with the name Pere Ubu to globally popularise the drama of Jarry from the late nineteenth century which so fascinated the 'young Baudrillard'. As popular music historian Clinton Heylin notes, David Thomas in 1975 in Cleveland, Ohio named his band Pere Ubu 'after Albert Jarry's caricature king because...it would be an added texture of absolute grotesqueness...a darkness over everything'. Baudrillard had never shown any awareness of this 'low culture' connection, though he did once appear in a 'punk' costume of his own (a gold lame jacket with mirrored lapels) reading the text of his self-penned 1980s poem 'Motel-Suicide' backed by a rock band at the 'Chance Event' held at Whiskey Pete's in Las Vegas in November 1996. The only surviving photo shows the short, balding, academic Baudrillard looking like he was auditioning for a place in The Clash.

To place Jean Baudrillard in any theoretical or political pigeon hole has always been difficult. It remains so today, even after his death. Although Baudrillard was influenced by Marxists like Jean-Paul Sartre, Herbert Marcuse and Henri Lefebvre his work has always born a tangential relationship to any brand of Marxism, neo- or otherwise. Philosophical antecedents of Baudrillard's work are complex and for sure Marx and Engels are present but

so too is Mani, the Persian Gnostic prophet who wrote one thousand eight hundred years ago. Although slated by many for being 'postmodernist' the moral relativism often connected to postmodernism is actually nowhere to be seen in Baudrillard. Nevertheless, from the 1970s onwards Baudrillard became associated with terms like postmodernism, postmodern sociology/art/architecture, and the general issues surrounding media and screen culture and virtual cyberspace which seem, inevitably, to attract the label 'postmodern'. It should be said that this process of linking Baudrillard with the idea of the 'post' was mainly through dubious labelling by others and not through Baudrillard's own words. Partly it has been a consequence of commentators using the term 'postmodern' to cover anything recent especially in the rapidly changing world of new media. In some ways, in any case, Baudrillard is a quite perverse choice of theorist of the new media technologies, or commentator on their future potential. He was stubbornly 'old media'. He admitted, in 1996, that he did 'not know much about this subject. I haven't gone beyond the fax and the automatic answering machine. I have a very hard time getting down to work on the screen because all I see there is a text in the form of an image which I have a hard time entering. With my typewriter, the text is at a distance. With the screen, it's different...That scares me a little and cyberspace is not of great use to me personally'. Baudrillard also always preferred photography, especially his own still photographs, to digital video.

The idea that Baudrillard was essentially a 'postmodern sociologist' is still pervasive, stemming from orthodox 1970s and 1980s readings of Baudrillard,

but it is, in the last instance, an unhelpful notion. Politically as well as intellectually such fixed perspectives have done no favours to Baudrillard or, ultimately, his readers. For instance, from the early 1960s Baudrillard and his friend Felix Guattari were regarded, confusingly, as Maoists. Later Baudrillard himself wrote books debating strands of Marxist theory in the early 1970s but his relationship to Marx and Marxism is certainly complex. Further, the period Baudrillard spent around the influential *Utopie* journal in France beginning in the mid 1960s and continuing until the late 1970s, was undoubtedly evidence of his involvement in ultra-leftist politics in France. But Baudrillard clearly broke with much European 'leftism' in the late 1970s and 1980s for being insufficiently radical. His future thinking was a perspective some way 'beyond' Marx. Baudrillard was present, as a lecturer, at the Nanterre university campus in France when it became the spark for May 68. However, Baudrillard was never a paid up member of left organisations and ploughed a very individual furrow throughout his life. Still the mislabelling persisted.

Situationist? Though sympathetic to the situationists he was never a member of the Situationist International, or ever even met Guy Debord.

New Philosopher? In the 1970s the Nouveaux Philosophes movement of Andre Glucksmann and Bernard-Henri Levy (former leftists who publicly renounced leftism) left Baudrillard untouched but he became guilty by association in the minds of some Trotskyists when he later published with Grasset, Bernard-Henri Levy's publishing house, and wrote in journals in France in the 1980s that were regarded as on the 'new right'. In 2006 Bernard-Henri Levy published a book of his diaries written while travelling in the USA entitled 'American Vertigo' which was compared favourably by the International

Journal of Baudrillard Studies to Jean Baudrillard's America, but 'left' criticism of Baudrillard's politics (and even sexual politics) persisted in Europe right up until his death.

Baudrillard's countryman Jean-Francois Lyotard, inventor of the term 'the postmodern condition', was a member in the 1960s of a leftist group called Socialism or Barbarism. Now, however, in the noughties, the rhetorical question has become more a case of Capitalism or Barbarism, even after the Stock Market Crash and the Credit Crunch. Baudrillard's work helps us to understand the political importance of this question and, more importantly, 'what is to be done' about it. With interest in Baudrillard at an all time high, new political and intellectual debates around his work will be provoked in the wake of his death. 'Fragments' is an oft used label for Baudrillard's work, employed twice in English translation of titles of his many books. What we are left with in his writings are fragments for the immediate future. We ignore them at our peril.

*This paper is based on Steve Redhead's newest book THE JEAN BAUDRILLARD READER, copublished in hardback and paperback in 2008 by Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh and Columbia University Press, New York, European Perspectives series. Steve Redhead is Professor of Sport and Media Cultures in the Chelsea School at the University of Brighton in the UK.