Simulacra and Hyperreality

…In that empire, the art of cartography attained such perfection that the map of a single province occupied the entirety of the city. In time, those unconscionable maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographer’s Guild struck a map of the empire whose size was that of the empire and coincided point for point with it.

On exactitude in science – Borges

Jean Baudrillard was a French philosopher, sociologist and cultural critic. Although lauded at times as the high priest of Post-modernism he belonged to no school. Early influences were Barthes and to some extent Lacan. His writings are firmly within the Post Structuralist tradition. Initially his critiques were neo-Marxist, in particular production in Late Capitalism cf. Adorno he rejected traditional explanations and later all social theory since both the bourgeois and the radical being reflections of each were essentially mutually supportive. His themes are consistent but can be confusing since he paints on such a large canvas. He makes wild almost hysterical dystopian assertions and then drills down into semiological niceties, adducing examples drawn from popular culture, books, movies and media events.

Although Baudrillard was the first to popularize the concepts of simulation and hyperreality, there are a number of other authors who explored similar ideas. In particular McLuhan in the 1960s, “the medium is the message”. In addition, Boorstin in “The Image” talks of the increasing spread of pseudo-events. Umberto Eco wrote in some detail on hyperreality, which he called vicarious reality or proxy reality.

I shall concentrate on two main works since these cover the radical post Marxist period and his refinement of deconstructed semiology into the worlds of consumerized artificial experience:

Symbolic Exchange and Death
Simulacra and Simulation

I have attempted to keep both to the spirit and the form of Baudrillard’s writings, in some areas by paraphrasing in others by interpretation and in many cases simply with quotes.

In his earlier work “The system of objects”, Baudrillard defines the following categories, which he uses in one form or another through his later writings.

1. functional value (use or utility)
2. exchange value (economic)
3. symbolic value (status)
4. sign value (only within a system of objects)

The first two terms are well described and understood in classical economic terms. Objects that have tangible application in our lives—be they shoes, automobiles, tools and so on will also have a monetary value ascribed to them within a particular society or culture. However, the last two categories are less tangible; how are they to be the valorized? This where Baudrillard begins to apply his analysis with a complex and almost infuriating exegesis.
Signs

What then is to be understood by signs? Baudrillard adopted both Saussure’s semiology and Barthe’s adaptations in myth in structuring the framework of his hyperreal universe.

The value of the sign depends on the relationship between the signs in a system. Saussure proposed a two-part model thus:

1. Signifier – the form of the sign
2. Signified – the concept of the sign

Sign is the association between the signified and the significer.

An example would be a literal sign on the door of a store saying “OPEN”. The signifier is the word “OPEN”. The signified is that the store is open for business. These are essential ideas in understanding Baudrillard since he claims that the significations are no longer clear and are in a state of flux. Essentially in modern consumer societies, the signifiers are empty, detached and “unthreaded”.

Symbolic Exchange

Although c 1970 Baudrillard generally had been endorsing the Marxist theory of capitalist consumption (over-production), he became increasingly critical of traditional use and exchange value theory. He reformulates Marx’s Law of Value, which he terms the Three Orders of Simulacra:

“”The Counterfeit. The schema of the pre-modern Renaissance to Industrial Revolution”
“Production. The schema of the Industrial Revolution.”
“Simulation. The schema of the current code – governed phase.”

These orders then define the progression (precession) from a natural law of value through a market phase to that of a structural law. He characterizes pre-capitalist societies as being organized on values of symbolic exchange rather than industrial production and utility. The modern by contrast no longer has a value other than that found in the simulacra. However, he fails to define the exact meaning of the code. Reality though becomes submerged into a series of fragmented operations and interactions whose meanings are already posed in their questions as tests (of social control).

“We live less as users than as readers and selectors...but beware since by the same token you are yourself constantly selected and tested by the medium itself.” A sentiment that echoes Nietzsche and Baudrillard’s drift toward a more elitist or aristocratic critique of society.

His critique becomes even more radical and is expressed in acerbic phrases, thus:

“Ecology is production haunted by shortages and using itself as a resource.”
“The less there is to do the more wage increases must be demanded.”
“Sport is political, not to mention art.”
And so on.
He takes opinion polls as being beyond all social production, which has replaced industrial production, and only refers to a simulacrum of Public Opinion that feeds on itself and grows in its own image. Nobody is obliged to produce an opinion but they must and do reproduce (echo) a public opinion. Only politicians believe in polls and advertising executives in PR.

The real, according to Baudrillard, is that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction (figuratively of course). The hyperreal is that which is already reproduced.

Baudrillard then sets up a Symbolic Exchange against conventional values and meanings, including that of death and ritual. He goes on to call for their overthrow, elimination and annihilation cf. Freud’s Death Drive. Death is a ritual only properly recognized in traditional communities. But also death is a reflection of the demise of the old order. So even by the 1970s, he sees societies organized and based on electronic simulations through computer interfaces, TV, virtual reality. Social production of info technology and mass communications now predominates over industrial production. Labor has lost its position as producer and creator of surplus value. It is simply a sign of social position and roles in an as yet to be determined hegemony. People live in a hyperreality of images, spectacles and the interchange of signs. Hyperreality is realized as the inability of consciousness to distinguish reality from a simulation.

Mundane reality has not disappeared but is simply absorbed by and articulated within an ever more expanding social framework of signs.

There is interestingly a tangible and even paradoxical echo of Rousseau in Baudrillard’s resurrection and application of traditional symbolic modes of exchange (gifting, potlatch, uniqueness of objects) to his analysis of the modern.

**Simulacra and Simulation**

Baudrillard defines simulation by models of the real with no origin or phenomenological reality. The real does not exist since it can be reproduced endlessly (fakes) The signs of the real substitute for the real. Historically society has transitioned from signs that dissimulate e.g. Byzantine and Baroque iconography to those that, as Baudrillard claims, dissimulate to nothing. “Simulation negates the sign as value… on the principle of equivalence.” This is the disconnection of cause and effect, the end of the rational. There is a progression in time of the sign order: -

“The reflection of a profound reality”
“The masking of the same”
“The masking of the absence of any such reality”
“No relation to anything –a pure simulacrum”.

The first is a faithful copy; the second is a perverted reality where the sign is not to be trusted. The third is where it pretends to be a faithful copy. In the last stage there is no relation to anything whatsoever and the signs merely reflect each other. Value is then the order of such claims.
Even ethnology is complicit in the sterilization and mirroring of societies. At the living eco-museum at Le Creusot, visitors are encouraged to interact with the working class townspeople who therefore become actors in their own plays and eventuality referential simulacra.

**The Hyperreal -Examples**

Disneyland, and other American theme parks, created according to Baudrillard in order to hide the real America since the surrounding LA is itself a simulation. “People no longer look at each other –there are institutes for that. They no longer touch each other, but there is contactotherapy. They no longer walk they jog. Here in the sophisticated confines of a triumphant market economy is reinvented a penury/sign, a penury simulation of the underdeveloped (including adoption of Marxist tenets) that in the guise of energy crises and a critique of capital adds a final esoteric aureole to the triumph of an esoteric culture”. Today Disneylands proliferate and are seemingly everywhere –Paris, Tokyo, Shanghai, HongKong. Some are lands, others worlds.

In politics simulation occurs through the precession (endless rotations) of the model. In today’s language “spin”. The facts whatever they may be only emerge at the intersection of the models. Hence, any interpretation can be true through the exchange of images of the models. “Everything is metamorphosed into its opposite but perpetuates itself in its expurgated form”

“The proof of theater is anti-theater. The proof of psychiatry through anti-psychiatry etc”.

Hyperreality and simulation are deterrents of every principle and every objective. Power is diffused, plays at the real, at crises, at socio economic stakes. Traditional production and reproduction have been replaced by the production of the hyperreal.

Reality TV and interactive media further blur the distinction between the subject and the object. “You no longer watch TV, it is the TV that watches you”. The end of the rational dialectic no less.

Even war is to be understood as a ritual exchange, again echoing his earlier thoughts on primitive societies. The idea is not to win or lose but to find some accommodation that satisfies both parties. Total nuclear annihilation as in the Cold War period was never on the cards. He quotes Orwell- “War is Peace.”

On the Pompidou Center and the San Francisco Exploratorium: -  
“Monuments to the games of mass simulation.”  
“Stockpiles of objects and people, the production of the masses.”

On the Hypermarket: -  
“Neither town nor country but a Metroplex.”  
“Surveillance CCTV –a sign of repression and control.”  
“A model of directed anticipation.”  
“A montage factory.”
The Media and Meaning

It is to the role of the media that Baudrillard gives a most detailed account. This is crucial since it modulates and determines our basic human understanding and purposes. Baudrillard contends that information destructs meaning and signification or at least simply neutralizes it. People become socialized through media interaction and its channels of dissemination. Baudrillard envisages a loss of communication through the process of staging or transmission of information. The networks are contaminated so entropy, cf. Claude Shannon, is maximized by call-ins, listener participation “you are the event”, random reversals etc.

Baudrillard takes McLuhan’s premise that the medium is the message a stage further by claiming that the medium is done for. The transmitter and the receiver can no longer be differentiated. “An Implosion of meaning, absorption of content, and evanescence of the medium.”

Baudrillard asks, how do the masses react? Are they informed or do they offer a passive resistance by simply not responding? Is it a case of manipulation by the media or is the media siding with the masses by creating a meaningless Black Hole into which media disappears? However, it is quite clear that the media both condemn and justify violent events, murders, disasters and in particular terrorism. He poses a further contradiction given the resistance of the subject against conformity and struggles for self-expression, since the masses are also at the same time obliged to conform to be dependent, childlike, infantile and passive. (These contradictions are by now of course all too apparent). Furthermore, if the essence of the system is to give all a voice then the resistance is the refusal of meaning. Finally, consciousness raising of the masses does not imply a revolutionary consciousness but an imperative of overproduction and regeneration of meaning and speech.

Advertising

This closely parallels the influences of the media although in a more pervasive and ultimately destructive context. “The absorption of all virtual modes of expression…the triumph of entropy over all tropes (literary figurations). No past, no future, instantly forgotten seductive and consensual”.

Advertising is the language of the masses, of propaganda, based on the mass production of ideas. Politics become brands (explicitly true today) so the political and the economic spheres merge. (An oft repeated theme of Baudrillard) The social then becomes a matter of supply and demand. It is endlessly self-referential, as publicity becomes its own commodity. Advertising creates a demand for itself on behalf of the social, “I vote, I am present, I am concerned”.

Las Vegas, the ultimate City of Advertising, ephemeral and nebulous is transformed at night by neon signs, only to disappear with the day.

“Advertising destroys intensities and accelerates inertia”. (Yet the hyperreal enhances sensation)
Literary Influences

Apart from acknowledging his debt to anthropology (Marcel Mauss, George Bataille, Durkheim et al) Baudrillard draws on the narratives of J G Ballard in particular the book/movie “Crash” and Philip K Dick’s “Simulacra” as the worlds of Sci Fi are by definition hyperreal. And to take a Baudrillard viewpoint these worlds are reflected back to us through the movie Matrix. Not only is a character shown reading Baudrillard but the premise is that the real is in fact physically hidden but can be accessed through a transformative ingestion of a pill. Further levels of hypostatization, of simulacra within simulacra are the scholarly articles written about the movie of a popularized misreading of the Hyperreal.
He also refers to and expands on Jarry’s Pataphysics –the science of imaginary solutions, since he has no definitive answer and no clear prescription for the future.

Conclusion.

I have tried to outline to the essential ideas that constitute Baudrillard’s hyperreal universe. These ideas were developed over 30 years ago so to what extent are they applicable to the world of 2014? Clearly there has been an explosion/implosion of social media, an acceleration of virtual experience and a grasping for a social relevance within or without the deconstructed forms explored above. Baudrillard’s use of language has been criticized as both pretentious and obscure (Sokal and Bricmont). His analysis of “frozen history”, the Gulf War and 911 even less favorably received.

Yet his prescience cannot be denied. Today we are sated with examples of computer driven simulations through which people endorse meaning e.g. Climate change models, structural design models, econometrics etc. Social media now a prime mover of the service economy become the social for a large percentage of the population of the developed world. People may be ambivalent over their exposure to TV but are seduced by ever more technological wonders. All is diffused through sound bites, video clips and the unitary nature of mass media. Language itself as an embodiment of meaning is unstable as words no longer mean the same or become their opposite. Information is content less. And if there is no meaning then what does it mean to be human? All solutions are undifferential, connected in the circular progression of the simulacrum. The death drive is on.

The meta message that lurks beneath the analysis and observations, Baudrillard does not judge but merely comments, is that of reification the triumph of objects over subjects. There are at any period many contradictions because there are always residues of former schema. Besides which contrast and opposition are fundamental to a post structuralist approach. In his later works, he outlines the ultimate coalescence of the subject and object to the point where the other totally disappears and is devoured by the object and there is only the same.

Baudrillard was also an avowed nihilist obsessed by the modes of disappearance of the old order, taking his cues from Adorno and Benjamin. Nevertheless, nihilism itself is not possible since it is a theory and theories ended with the death of the dialectic. Only
melancholia remains. So is, meaning dead or simply awaiting reanimation? Baudrillard would probably affirm both.

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