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JEAN BAUDRILLARD

Key Concepts

- simulation
- simulacra
- the postmodern
- hyperreality

Jean Baudrillard (1929–) is a postmodern cultural theorist who is particularly noted for his critiques of contemporary consumer society. Trained as a sociologist, he has become one of the key theorists of postmodernity.

Baudrillard was born in 1929 in Reims in northeastern France. His grandparents were peasant farmers and his parents worked in civil service jobs. At the University of Nanterre, he studied sociology under Henri **LEFEBVRE**. He taught sociology at Nanterre from 1966 until his retirement in 1987. His earliest work was written from the perspective of a Marxist sociologist, but in subsequent studies his intellectual mentors often came to be the objects of his critiques, including Lefebvre, Marx, and Sartre. Baudrillard's early engagement with Marxist theory was later abandoned after he embraced poststructuralist ideas in the 1970s. Baudrillard was also a student of the theories of Roland **BARTHES** and the mass media theorist Marshall McLuhan. Baudrillard's first book, _The System of Objects_ (published in French in 1968), is a semiotic analysis of culture that was influenced by Barthes' poststructuralist ideas.

Baudrillard's work on postmodern culture—usually radical in its claims—utilizes ideas drawn from various disciplines including linguistics, philosophy, sociology, and political science. He addresses a wide range of issues, including mass media, mass consumption, consumer society, war, and terrorism. Baudrillard is best known for work such as _Simulacra and Simulation_ (published in French in 1981), in which he analyzes the nature of postmodern culture, asserting that contemporary culture can no longer distinguish image from reality. Baudrillard's view is that the "conventional universe of subject and object, of ends and

means, of good and bad, does not correspond any more to the state of our world" (*Impossible Exchange,* p. 28).

Within the context of his explorations of postmodern Western culture, Baudrillard is especially interested in representation. His work examines ways in which technology and media impact how we represent our experiences and what we can know about the world. Baudrillard argues that contemporary culture is so saturated with images from television, film, advertising, and other forms of mass media that differences between the real and the imagined, or truth and falsity, are indistinguishable. Images do not represent reality, but rather become reality. Our lives are thus **simulations** of reality in the sense that simulation constructs what counts as the real from conceptualizations that have no intrinsic or direct connection to reality. Images produced by mass media neither refer to reality nor harbor any independent meaning.

What are the implications of living in an image-saturated, postmodern society? In effect, our experiences of the world are mediated through the many images that confront us every day and that frame how we see the world and what we see. Notions of the perfect body, for instance, come about not because of some unmediated experience we have in the world, but largely through all the body images projected by media, advertising, and other instruments of image production.

Central to Baudrillard's understanding of the relationship between reality and representations of it are the concepts of "simulacrum" and "hyperreality." A **simulacrum** is an image or representation of something. Baudrillard uses this term to refer to an image that has *replaced* the thing it supposedly represents. In *Simulacra and Simulation,* Baudrillard distinguishes three phases, or "orders," of the simulacrum in Western history. With each order, the image or simulacrum is increasingly alienated from that which it purports to represent. First-order simulacra, which alter or mask reality, emerge prominently in the baroque period, with its privileging of artifice over realism. Drawing from Walter BENJAMIN's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Baudrillard identifies the emergence of second-order simulacra with the modern age of mass production and its resulting proliferation of reproductions, that is, images of an "original" image, which in turn is an image of the "real" thing. It is an image of an image. Third-order simulacra are the simulacra of the current **postmodern** age. In postmodernity, the simulacrum has lost all relation to reality. It is a production of reality, not an imitation. In postmodernity, the simulacrum has replaced the real so that we live in a world of simulacra.

Although images may appear to refer to or represent objects in the real world, "reflecting" a preexisting reality, Baudrillard argues that in postmodernity images precede the real. If so, then we live in a world of simulation and not of reality. One characteristic of such a postmodern world is the proliferation of media for producing images that simulate reality, including photography, film, television, and the World Wide Web. Baudrillard says, "To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have" (*Simulacra and Simulation,* p. 3). In short, simulation does not refer to reality or pretend to imitate it; rather, it constructs reality.

In *Simulacra and Simulation,* Baudrillard provides us with an example of how an image becomes reality itself. He cites a Jorge Luis Borges story in which "the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly" (*Simulacra and Simulation,* p. 1). The map, which is a representation of a real space, becomes the reality, or, to use Baudrillard's term, a **hyperreality**: "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (*Simulacra and Simulation,* p. 1). From this perspective, "[t]he territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—*precession of simulacra*—that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map" (*Simulacra and Simulation,* p. 1). For Baudrillard, the map has become the reality, not a representation of it. A hyperreal world, then, is one in which the real and the imaginary have imploded and the boundaries separating them no longer stand, nor do boundaries separating autonomous spheres exist. Thus, for instance, CNN and other cable news networks blur distinctions between fact, opinion, sports, politics, weather, and entertainment. The news does not describe or represent reality, it is reality. Baudrillard goes so far as to argue that media and other imaginary constructs, like Disneyland, function to create America itself as nothing more than a hyperreal simulation of the real.

Simulation commonly refers to something fake or counterfeit, unreal or inauthentic. But Baudrillard does not simply contrast simulation with the real; rather, he sees these as having suffered a radical disconnection. For Baudrillard, we can no longer meaningfully inquire about the relative truth or falsity of images and representations. Virtual worlds created by computer graphics underscore the idea that a reality can be created where there is no preexisting reality that the virtual version represents.

Baudrillard's ideas raise significant questions and issues for the study of religion. The proliferation of images that, he asserts, characterizes the postmodern is also characteristic of at least some forms of contemporary religion and the technologies used by these religions to promote and disseminate their messages. How, we might ask, does the proliferation of images by various media affect religion? Has contemporary religion become a simulation of religions past? If so, how? How does TV evangelism, for instance, take advantage of the saturation of images in a postmodern world? Are religious representations ever really anything other than simulations? These Baudrillardian questions and issues are all the more intriguing given the notion that religion is typically

understood to describe the "really" real—a reality that Baudrillard claims no longer exists.

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WALTER BENJAMIN

Key Concepts

- critique of violence
- the task of the translator
- the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction
- angel of history

Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) was born in Berlin to a Jewish family that had largely assimilated to the city's Christian mainstream. He was educated at the universities of Berlin, Freiburg, Munich, and Bern. As a student he became involved in radical Jewish student movements and, along with his close friend Gershom Scholem, grew increasingly interested in Jewish mysticism. (Scholem went on to become a great scholar of Jewish mysticism.) In 1925 Benjamin submitted *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* as his *Habilitationsschrift* (a document required for promotion to a university position) at the University of Frankfurt. It was rejected because of its unconventional, lyrical style, and Benjamin never held a formal academic post. He worked as an independent scholar, freelance critic, and translator.

In 1933, with the rise of the Nazis in Germany, Benjamin moved to Paris, where he met Hannah Arendt among many other intellectuals. In 1939 he was deprived of his German nationality and spent time in an internment camp. In 1940, at the invitation of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the School for Social Research (recently moved from Frankfurt to New York to escape the Nazis), Benjamin attempted to flee the French Vichy regime for the United States. When he arrived at Portbou on the Franco-Spanish border, he was refused entry into Spain. To return to France would have meant certain death. The next morning he was found dead, apparently a suicide by morphine overdose.

Benjamin wrote on a wide range of topics—from literary tragedy to modernity to Paris to messianism—and in a range of styles, from essay to commentary to aphorism. Artists, historians, literary critics and philosophers have all been