

# An Excavation of Jean Baudrillard's Theory of Postmodernism

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**Abstract:** *Jean Baudrillard is in controvertibly one of the leading gargantuan intellectuals whose works are pastiches of philosophy, social theory and an idiosyncratic cultural metaphysics. Being a high ranking postmodern theorist, Baudrillard has fledged the most provocative Postmodern theory ever and his influential works have been translated into Germany, Italian, Spanish etc. Apparently a copious writer, he has more than thirty books to his credit. Baudrillard adroitly displays apt originality in his writings and devotees and critics alike align in heralding him as one of the most influential philosophers of the later twentieth century. Though he will swiftly object to the label "postmodern" but this has not prevented him from being reckoned as such because his ideas proved to be the major catalytic reagents of the postmodern impulse. Thus an assessment of his theory of postmodernism furnishes one with a panoramic perspective on postmodern philosophy*

## 1. Postmodernity: The dead of the real and the birth of simulation, simulacra and hyperreality

Baudrillard's exposition of the postmodern phenomena of *Simulation*, *Simulacrum* and *Hyperreality* is adequately contoured when precedent on a synoptic capturing of the development and content of the science of "Semiotics" or Semiology. The origin of this science is traceable to ancient physicians' treatment of all illness through the manifested symptoms. They established prescribed treatments and remedies for every symptom manifested of a malfunction. This means that they concentrated on treating the signs of the disease rather than attack the disease causing agent-germ. At this period, the germ theory of treating disease was not developed. From this tradition of treating signs or symptoms arose the earliest definition of the Greek notion of *semiotics* as the study of medical signs or *symptomology*.

In recent times, semiotics as a science offers the knowledge of understanding the world as a system of relations whose denominator is the sign. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913) developed the modern science of semiotics. Saussure concentrated on developing a general theory of natural language with emphasis on bringing out the commonalities in every culture. He employed the concept of the sign to bring out such commonalities. In his framework, a *sign* consists of two components, a *signifier*; the acoustic image of the spoken word as heard by the receiver of a spoken word, and a *signified*; the meaning the mind of the recipient extracts from the signifier. In Saussure's milieu, all languages manifest a unity of the signifier with the signified moderated by cultural conventions. The relationship between a signifier "pot" and the signified, "cooking utensil" is accomplished through cultural socialization and prescription. Sign, then is conditioned by cultural conventions and processes. He demonstrated that since culture is a pan-linguistic phenomenon, then semiotics can be used in studying all cultural forms.

Roland Barthes, elaborated extensively Saussure's theory of the sign. In his *Elements of Semiology* (1967), he notes that Saussure's sign is primarily denotational, whereby a signifier refers directly to a specific object. In his view, *sign*

can also be connotational with wider and enlarged meanings. In buttressing this he utilized a graphic example in his *Mythologies* (1985) where he dissects a picture on the cover of the *Paris Match* of an African soldier saluting the French flag. This scene on the one hand denotes an act of national allegiance and connotes military discipline, patriotism and nationalism. Over and against this multi-strata levels of meaning, Barthes points out that this sign of allegiance was also a signifier of colonial subservience and constituted another sign of the personification of imperialism and Franco subjugation of the African at the level of myth. The personified myth reduces into insignificance the materiality of the stage-salute sign. Barthes concentrated on the second order sign function or myths. The deduction from Barthes' illustration is that in this semiotics, the object itself was insignificantly irrelevant in comparison with the image and how it functioned as an intensification points for some ideologies. Jean Baudrillard was later to radicalize this Barthes' notion of myth condensation created by the image which renders the object insignificant to the extent of being skeptical of the existence of reality in a society driven by such ideologically condensed myths.

Baudrillard who is renowned for his critic of contemporary culture, appropriates Barthes' semiology to analyze contemporary culture, describing how objects are couched in a system of signs and meanings that constitute contemporary media and consumers societies. He observes that the postmodern culture is not conditioned by the unity between the *signifier* and the *signified* as such unity has been ruptured, rather, it is a scenario where the *signifier* becomes its own referent and is no longer constrained by nor viewed as a representation of an objective reality or a signified.

In this postmodern society, a hegemony of sign value has superseded use value and production and consumption of commodities are based on the sign value and the social status they accord. In the dramatic and imaginary world of sign value, when one purchases a certain terrific state-of-the-arts car, a set of designers apparels or a house which is an architectural master piece, one is purchasing it in order to consume the signs of prestige, currency and social status they confer on the consumer and not necessarily because of their use-value. A relation of Baudrillard to Marx on this will

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show that Baudrillard's political economy analysis affirms the Marxian claim that in the capitalist economy, there is a transmutation of use-value into economic exchange value. But unlike Marx, Baudrillard theorizes that in this postmodern era, commodities are not merely to be characterized by use value but by sign value; symbols and marks of style, prestige, status, power, etc.

In his discourse in the book *Simulacra and Simulation* he places this state of affairs in perspective by terminologising it with such neologisms as *simulation*, *simulacra*, *hyperreality* etc. In this book Baudrillard articulates the principle of fundamental rupture between modern and postmodern theories. The breakage is captured thus:

The transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer any God to recognize his own, nor any last judgement to separate truth from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance. (12)

This process of dissimulation of signs evolves through four stages (*Simulacra 12*):

- 1) The first stage is a faithful image/copy, where we believe that the sign is a reflection of a basic reality, this is the "sacramental order".
- 2) The second is the stage of perversion, where the sign masks and denatures reality. This is the "maleficence order" in which images are not faithful copies of reality.
- 3) The third stage masks the absence of a basic reality, where the simulacrum pretends to be a faithful copy, where as, it lacks any referential basis in reality. He calls this the "order of the sorcery".
- 4) The fourth stage is the stage where signs merely reflect other signs, with no reference to reality at all. This is the stage of pure simulation.

The natural inquiry that arises from the analyses above is a demand for the clarification of terms like "simulate", "dissimulate", and "simulacra" as they emerge in the analyzed context. In Baudrillard's view, "to simulate" is to feign what is not while "to dissimulate" is to conceal or hide what is. Simulation, thus explains the phenomenon of replacing the real with the virtual or the simulacra. Stephen Best and Kellner explain that "simulacra" "are representations of the real, that are so omnipresent that it is henceforth impossible to distinguish the real from simulacra. The world of simulacra for Baudrillard is precisely a postmodern world of signs without depth, origins or referent" (*The Postmodern Turn* 101).

Three orders of simulacra are identified in Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (13) the first order is related to the premodern period. Here the image copy is recognized as an artificial imitation of the real. The second order is connected to the modern period scenario of industrial revolution, where distinctions between image and reality breakdown due to the proliferation of mass-reproducible copies of items. In the wake of massive proliferation and commodification of items,

the commodity's ability to imitate the original version is widely compromised. The third order is associated with postmodernity. Here, unlike the previous two orders where the 'real' precedes the 'imitation' or simulacrum and there is still a delineable distinction between the real and its representation, in the third order scenario of the evolution of simulacrum instantiated by postmodernity, the simulacrum precedes the original and there is a palpable vanishing or waning of the distinction between reality and its representation.

This blurring of boundaries and the disintegration of distinctions between the real and the unreal gives birth to an entirely novel realm of simulation, a realm Baudrillard calls "the generation of real without origins or reality; a hyperreal" (*Simulations 2*). He juxtaposes the modern era and the postmodern. The modern era was marked by industrial production owned by the bourgeoisie and the society was characterized as being metallurgic as a consequence of metal serving as the fulcrum of industrialism. The postmodern era, on the other hand is marked by simulations and is characterized by a manipulation of Information, Science, Technology to create models, codes and cybernetics which do not imitate the real but which the real must imitate. The *metallurgic* society of the modern era has been superseded by the *semiurgic* postmodern society.

Baudrillard makes reference to the *Disneyland* models of the United States to encapsulate his view of hyperreality, where models precede or serve as the basis for the real. The Disneyland is an hype model with enchanted themes of the US social reality. This simulated version of the US is more real than the reality itself and the reality (the US) is undergoing phases of transformation to assume and approximate the simulated hyperreal model of the Disneyland. As the real is today taking after the simulated copy, the idea of reality becomes obsolete, the boundaries between the real and hyperreal is erased and there is no distinction between reality and illusion because the hyperreal has assimilated reality irrevocably.

Baudrillard uses the notion of *implosion* to articulate this condition of boundaries blurring and collapsing of meaning in his postmodern social theory. Postmodern implosion is best appreciated from its predecessor, explosion, of the modern era. The shrinking of national boundaries, the expanding proliferation of production, and the overwhelming super performance of science and technology, capital and social polarization consummated the industrial explosion which the Western modern society experienced. The postmodern era marks a movement from metallurgical (industrial capitalism) modern society to that of semiurgic (sign production) postmodern society marked by "implosion", a term employed by Baudrillard to project a postmodern condition in which "information dissolves meaning and the social into a sort of nebulous state leading not at all to a surfeit of innovation but to the very contrary, to total entropy" (*In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 100).

The postmodern *Mediasphere* occasions the collapse or implosion of boundaries as there is an intensification of

distinction, disintegration between information, message, entertainment, politics and images. In this stage, a social apathy pervades the masses who suddenly become a silent majority in the face of the ongoing dissolution of truth and meaning.

## 2. Conclusion

Baudrillard construes the postmodern era by employing all the telling narratives to analyze the contemporaneity of postmodernity. The postmodern phenomenon is comprehensively entrenched in a reader's mind after the reader's grasp and comprehension of the language, linguistic descriptives and particular meaning renditions exposed by Baudrillard in his analyses of the postmodern phenomenon.

The postmodern era is marked by a condition of hyperreality, the reign of simulacra, dependence of the real on the simulacra and the perpetual demise or implosion of reality. It is a condition of simulation and dissimulation, foundationlessness and nonreferentiality of reality. It is a condition akin to a revolutionary astronomical theory that denies the sun centered universe and advocates plurocentric multiverse. Hence Ravi Zacharias wonders aloud thus:

What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun?  
whither is it moving? Away from all suns? Are we not  
plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all  
directions? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? (*The  
Real Face of Atheism* 21)

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