

Jean Baudrillard

“The System of Objects” in Commodity Culture: Myths and Structures (1970)

Jean Baudrillard, the versatile French thinker who started his academic life as a Marxist sociologist interested in consumer society (he completed his Ph.D. thesis in 1966). He concluded that what was formerly a society of production had now (after World War II) become one of consumption. To make this argument he culls together philosophy, sociology and anthropology and psychology to make his chief claims, which is the postmodern refutation of traditional Marxism and his influential articulation of postmodernism as “simulacra”—that is, a copy of a copy without an original.

Some background:

- Like most French intellectuals, Baudrillard was deeply disillusioned by the events of May 1968, and the failure of the social revolution predicted by Marx and the reinstallation of bourgeois authoritarian order, which demonstrated not only the middle class docility but also the opposition to real social reform. Capitalism had triumphed and the desire for commodities and social stability was more potent than the desire for reform and revolution.
- Traditional Marxists maintained that the economy was more important and more “real” than the super structure of culture.
- Through the Frankfurt School (Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno) began to look at mass culture as part of this political economy, they maintained the modernist belief that ultimately there was an original.
 - EX The “aura” of art- art can be free of culture.
 - For Baudrillard- culture was a “system of signs”
 - Baudrillard sought to reconstitute Marxist political economy on the basis of the genealogical theories of the sign-> Bringing together Ferdinand de Saussure (SIGNS) + Freud (PSYCHOLOGY)
 - Objects lose their singular nature and are subordinated into systems that are relative to each other, just as language is understood only within a network of relationships which constitute meaning.” (Baudrillard)

He wrote that there are four ways of an object obtaining value. **The four value-making** processes are:

- 1) **Functional Value:** value of an object; its instrumental purpose. A pen, for instance, writes; a refrigerator cools.
- 2) **Exchange Value** of an object; its economic value. One pen may be worth three pencils; and one refrigerator may be worth the salary earned by three months of work.
- 3) **Symbolic Value** of an object; a value that a subject assigns to an object *in relation to another subject* (i.e., between a giver and receiver). A pen might symbolize a student's school graduation gift or a commencement speaker's gift; or a diamond may be a symbol of publicly declared marital love.
- 4) **Sign Value** of an object; its value within a *system* of objects. A particular pen may, while having no added functional benefit, signify prestige relative to another pen; a diamond ring may have no function at all, but may suggest particular social values, such as taste or class

Objects are Embedded in a System of Signs

- Understanding the objects we consume as a system of signs that had to be decoded, this system being embedded in structures of consumption and leisure that he felt could be analysed sociologically.
- Baudrillard argues that the object is embedded within the sign system.
- GARP (Page One)
- In other words, we consume the sign. We all live in a new world of leisure and mass media, which produce an alienation of conspicuous consumption and empty affluence (“*affluenza*”) in which, in America, according to Baudrillard, the consumers desire what others have.
- This fundamental alteration in the human species from using or utilizing what is considered necessary to desiring what is not necessary, except psychologically (desire), has resulted in a culture of affluent individuals surrounded by objects (signs).
- Marx argues in Capital I that objects all have a “use value”: for example, a hammer is useful for hammering nails into a board. But under capitalism, all objects are reduced to their “exchange value,” their value or price in the marketplace (the hammer might cost \$10 in the local hardware store).
- Baudrillard takes this further- adding that, at least in advanced capitalist countries, consumer goods also have a sign exchange value: they are signs of distinction, taste, and social status.
- A BMW or a Canada Goose Jacket can certainly have both use and exchange value (we can drive the BMW to work, or sell the watch to a used jewelry dealer); but, says Baudrillard, we also have to understand their status as signs in the code of consumer values - they signify social distinction.
- Everyday life is now determined by manipulation of commodities and messages, all of which become an organization and display of domestic goods to be desired and consumed. Commodities are part of a “system of objects” that are correlated with a system of needs.
- Objects are offered within the context of other objects, and the collection of objects creates a total meaning. As Baudrillard wrote, **“It is even the ultimate in morality, since the consumer is simultaneously reconciled with himself and with the group. The becomes the perfect social being.”**

Commodity Fetishism

: 'fetishism' begins to describe human relations with material objects; non-human things in the world with which pseudo-human relations are established.

- Marx's account of fetishism addresses the exchange-value of commodities at the level of the economic relations of production but it fails to deal in any detail with the use-value or consumption of commodities.
 - For Marx the reality of the commodity is its representation of congealed labour through which it derives its value. In its unreal or fetishised form the commodity appears to have intrinsic value derived from its material character.
 - The fetishised commodity represents a misconception of the origins of value the system of ideas supporting capitalist production that Marx calls 'commodity fetishism'.

- Freud's concept of the fetish as a desired substitute for a suitable sex object explores how objects are desired and consumed
 - For Freud the reality of shoes or undergarments is as clothes, as items worn as part of normal apparel. But the unreal or fetish form of the shoe or undergarment is, for the fetishist, an agent of sexual arousal.
 - In Freud's work the unreal object that arouses the fetishist indicates a perversion. Its origins lie in a misconception of the lack in the female genitalia that leads to a substitute for the proper sexual object.
- Drawing on both Marx and Freud, Baudrillard breaks with their analyses of fetishism as demonstrating a human relation with unreal objects.
- He explores the creation of value in objects through the social exchange of sign values, showing how objects are fetishised in ostentation.

The Body

- “What we want to show is that the current structures of production/ consumption induce in the subject a dual practice, linked to a split (but profoundly interdependent) representation of his/her own body: the representation of the body as capital and as fetish (or consumer object). In both cases, it is important that, far from the body being denied or left out of account, there is deliberate investment in it (in the two senses, economic and psychical, of the term).” (Baudrillard, 129)
- “‘Are you at ease in your body?’ Right away, in comes Brigitte Bardot (BB): she ‘is at ease in her body’. ‘Everything about her is beautiful: her neck, her back, particularly the small of the back ... BB's secret? She really inhabits her body. She is like a little animal who precisely fills up her dress.’ (Does she inhabit her body or her dress? Which of these, the body or the dress, is her second home? This is precisely the point: she wears her body like a dress, and this makes ‘inhabiting’ a fashion effect, a ‘package’ effect, and relates it to a ludic principle which is further reinforced by the ‘little animal’ reference.”

Simulacra and Simulations.

Simulation meaning that it is simulating a process, display or imitating something real

Simulacra meaning the representation of another thing, object, person and any static object.

- Baudrillard uses these meanings to explain that today's reality is not real and that we all live in something called a hyper reality. Baudrillard's definition of hyper reality is ‘The simulation of something that never really existed’. (Baudrillard).
- Hyper reality is taking something real, that has an original and natural quality, then exaggerating it to make it look so perfect it could become a fantasy of the imagination.
 - EX. Women on the cover of Vogue, Christmas tress, grocery store.

Krauss: "For the meaning of most art objects is logged within a mesh of ideas and feelings held by the creator of the work, past through the act of authorship into the work, and thereby transmitted to a viewer or reader of it. The traditional work is like a transparent pane- a window through which the psychological spaces of the creator open up onto each other." (76)

As Joshua Simon articulates "This matter is first and foremost one of presence, not of representation. Therefore, our interest in the language of things has everything to do with our ability to change the social, historic, and material relations that are present in the commodity." (Simon)