

The Poetry of Theory: Jean Baudrillard's Philosophy as Fiction

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Abstract This paper aims to articulate the performative dimensions of Jean Baudrillard's theory, and to problematize the seemingly separate domains occupied by philosophy and literature. I argue that attention to the style of philosophical discourse is important not only because it is that which presents and reinforces the strength of theory, but also because in cases, such as Baudrillard's, "philosophical discourse" is the style. Criticisms directed against Baudrillardian philosophy assume the seriousness of his social theory, while the most sympathetic readings call for a selective forgetting, gleaning the academic from the performance. Instead, I argue that to read Baudrillard is to take a *double-bind* that primarily operates on the context of fiction, the acceptance of which enables a better understanding of theory. A recognition of the validity of poetry and literature as theoretical musings allows us to recognize the possibility of philosophical discourse as form, or genre.

Key words performative theory; poetics; fictionality; Jean Baudrillard; science fiction

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"Cipher, do not decipher."¹

Introduction

In academic philosophy, as in everything else, meaning is of utmost importance. Our preoccupation with language is not so much a preoccupation of utterances, as a preoccupation of its capacity to contain meaning, its ability to mediate

1 Jean Baudrillard, "Radical Thought," trans. by David Macey, *Parallax* 1:1 (1995) 61.

and transfer a thought from one mind to another. To a serious academician, everything—utterances, gestures, cultural practices, historical events, even spaces and monuments—is seen as a text, as language from which meaning is mined, excavated. This also means that there is a certain amount of seriousness that we ascribe to everything.

With the advent of postmodernism, the incredulity of grand narratives, we have veered away from the one true meaning, but still subscribe to meanings. We recognize that the cheek-in-tongue performativity of the clowns of postmodernism still rely on a reference, albeit more reflectively. We read into Marcel Duchamp's *La Fontaine* as somebody who is introducing a ready-made art, but at the same time, taking a piss at the art world; the same thing applies to Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*.

However, what makes these different and meaningful still is the temporary suspension of seemingly fixed structures. The suspension of the privilege of content over form—in the end, dissolved by an assurance that the form *is* the content—enables one to recognize the value of postmodern art as guaranteed by an artistic theory.¹ Its attempt to evade meaning is superficial, to demonstrate further another dimension of sense.

In the same manner, we read other stylistic works as operating from a kind of suspension and suspicion. The dichotomy that we have of content and form, or subject and object, or truth and fiction, are often toyed with by intellectuals who are aware of the arbitrariness, but also the importance, of language, in strengthening their theory. But of course, this also comes from the idea that philosophy and literature occupy different, albeit sometimes overlapping, domains, where philosophy's focus is content and literature's, form.

The preoccupation of meaning in the dichotomy of content and form assumes the objective existence of subject and object, of truth and fiction, and of the idea that "theory" is an attempt to mirror reality. This preoccupation of meaning is also what drives the criticisms against Jean Baudrillard's refusal to affirm these dichotomies.

The frustration of pinning his theory down is due to his insistence of reversibility. Instead of a temporary suspension of the realm of truth for the world of fiction, as Danto argues for postmodern art, Baudrillard stubbornly accepts both. The absence of a dichotomy or a semblance of any form of bifurcation, even a temporary one, meant that everything is the same as everything else. It is eternal reversibility, a TV screen in a perpetual channel-flip.

1 See Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61:19 (1964) 581. He writes: "What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art is a certain theory of art. It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible."

Baudrillard's Theory

Like most intellectuals during the May '68 student revolt in France, Baudrillard was also influenced by Marxist ideas, and has critiqued the capitalist system. Evident in books such as *The System of Objects* and *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard proposed an extension of Marx's critique of capitalist systems by saying that in addition to the use-value and exchange-value proposed by Marx, the logic of capitalism follows what Baudrillard calls as the "sign-value." Our use, production, and consumption of objects, especially in the age of techno-capitalism, is fueled by the arrangement and manipulation of signs attached to these objects. If for Marx, the idea of exchange-value came about with the eventual use and development of money, for Baudrillard, sign-value came about through the rise of mass production. From the creation of different brands of the same object rose the need for social differentiation. This functions in the levels of both economy and psychology.

From the point of view of economy, the creation of different brands of the same product forces different producers or manufacturers to resort to advertisement that will help in improving the "image" of the product. This means that beyond the product's use and exchange value, capitalists must expand the edge of the product by creating meaning, backstory. From the point of view of psychology, the abolition of aristocracy, and the rhetoric of free market, and liberty made the conditions ripe for the creation of new social hierarchies, this time hierarchies that value, not bloodline but hard work. In aristocratic societies, certain objects are forbidden and/or unattainable. In capitalist societies, access to objects and products that are also mass-produced became easier. To differentiate oneself from the other then means not only a reinstatement of social classes, but also of the creation of more cultural spaces where the manipulation of objects, treated as signs, did not escape. The over-presence of sameness makes the idea of difference all the more valuable, and the producer and the consumer each have reasons for wanting social differentiation, hence the attachment of an unstable idea of sign-value.

Upon developing his idea of the sign-value, Baudrillard gave an account of the exchange done before the rise of capitalism. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard seemed to be tracing the purer form of signification through his idea of the symbolic. Influence by Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille, Baudrillard affirms that even before, objects already carry meaning, but that their signification was more rooted in their original difference. The value of objects then came from its rarity, conditions of scarcity, whereas today, the value of objects comes from its excess.

From connecting the idea of sign-value and symbolic-value, Baudrillard began

to explore the other implications and trajectory of his initial project of extending Marx through semiotics. Baudrillard's transition from his focus in the *System of Objects* and *Consumer Society* to that in *Simulations and Simulacra* implies, I argue, a complex theory of language, metaphysics and epistemology. How do we perceive the world, and what is the relation of our perception of it to our use of language, specifically, our use of the language of objects?

Whilst functioning at the level of a post-Marxist critique of capitalism, Baudrillard's theory of simulations also comments on our perception of reality. In a way influenced by the Situationists and Walter Benjamin, Baudrillard's concept of the image, our valorization of it, affects the way we communicate, we act, we see the world. This valorization of the image—already hinted by the idea of sign-value—permits us to manipulate and be manipulated by images.

Later, Baudrillard would go on to say that everything has become an image, and that even our concepts of reality has become entangled with appearances. It is in this context that Baudrillard declares the end of politics, and art, and culture, and so on. Already present in his earlier works, though not as explicit, the tone in his later works assume a bleaker view of reality. The irony, however, is that, while the other post-Marxists and critical theorists flirt with the project of diagnosing social problems and prescribing of solutions, Baudrillard decides to parade his suggestion, that of excess. Not quite admitting defeat, Baudrillard insists that whatever damage the system, or the precession of images, or simulacra has done, is irreversible, but that at the same time, in pushing the system to its limits, a total revolution, the system will eventually collapse.

This seemingly outright diagnosis of the society, and the prescription to give up is not easily acceptable to the academic world, especially when part of one's strategies is to assume a hostile demeanor, challenging Marx, Foucault, the feminists, among others.

Baudrillard and His Critics

The polarizing character of Jean Baudrillard's philosophy stems mainly from his style of writing that further emphasizes the apparent contradiction of his concepts to the issues he claims to address. In what it seems as his attempt to diagnose culture and society, his rhetoric often misses the point, which explains why a few other scholars think Baudrillard has lost himself in the carnival of concepts. He has

gone too far to even relate his ideas to reality.¹ Baudrillard's philosophy is said to "degenerate into sloganeering and rhetoric without any systematic or comprehensive theoretical position."² Best and Kellner would go as far as to add that Baudrillard could be read as a cyberpunk science fiction. However, contrary to positing science fiction as completely removed from reality, Eugene Thacker focuses on "the distance that separates the imagined future of science fiction from the empirical reality of society"³ hence making the efficacy of science fiction as a gauge for the state of reality. At the same time, he posits that as a genre, science fiction also serves as fuel for man to "intervene in the history of the present."⁴ Kellner adds nuance to his critique by saying that comparable to Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, while Baudrillard "takes current trends to possible conclusions, and provides instructive warnings about certain social tendencies and phenomena.... [he also] takes current trends and possibilities as finalities, treating tendencies as realized states."⁵

Like Kellner, Rojek and Turner observe that Baudrillard's arguments "[collide] with most of the assumptions and conventions used to manage normality in everyday life"⁶ which makes Baudrillard's philosophy interesting, and dangerous—dangerous because this notoriety could veer philosophy away from solving the real problems. Paul Hegarty would also note that the main contention critics have of Baudrillard is "his removal, through analyses of the 'real world,' of reality,"⁷ that is, whilst his poetic imagination runs free, his "fiction" masquerading as a "theory" runs the risk of downplaying significant resistance at stake.

In subverting the epistemological binaries of subject and object, Baudrillard

1 See Christopher Norris, "Lost in the Funhouse: Baudrillard and the Politics of Postmodernism" in *Textual Practice*, vol.3 no.3 (1989): 360-387. Together with Norris, A. Keith Goshorn, in his article "Valorizing the 'Feminine' while Rejecting Feminism?: Baudrillard's Feminist Provocations" also mentions Arthur Vidich's "Baudrillard's America: Lost in the Ultimate Simulacrum," and J. Hoberman's "Lost in America: Jean Baudrillard, Extraterrestrial."

2 Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (London: Macmillan, 1991) 140.

3 Eugene Thacker, "The Science Fiction of Technoscience: The Politics of Simulation and a Challenge for New Media Art," in *Leonardo*, vol.31 no.2 (2001) 156.

4 Thacker, p.158.

5 Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (USA: Stanford University Press, 1989) 203.

6 Chris Rojek and Bryan Turner, "Introduction," *Forget Baudrillard?* (London: Routledge, 1993) xi.

7 Paul Hegarty, *Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2004) 2.

would employ the metaphor of seduction linked and likened to the woman—described by Baudrillard as an object—that holds the secret power. This rhetoric denies, delays, and undermines the demands for change, warranting Goshorn's suspicion that, despite "the possibility that Baudrillard in his most recent writings may have arrived, almost in spite of himself, at a position on gender and sexuality that at times intersects favorably with the most progressive trends in current feminist thought,"¹ it might be understandable for feminists to be offended by his "rude-boy tactics."²

Much like the reversibility Baudrillard attributes to the subject and the object, Ian Almond also articulates the inversion of West vs. Rest binary in looking at Islam, and explains how Baudrillard's rhetoric converges different meanings to claim that Islam is the end of the West's suicide.³ While read as provocations, critics also point out the inconsistencies in Baudrillard's texts.

Even his most useful concepts, such as hyperreality and simulation, are sometimes downplayed as diversions and distractions from more pressing problems. Aaron Schwabach, for example, dismisses Baudrillard's critique of virtual wars as "facile, meaningless, and morally empty"⁴ as this does not deny the fact that real lives were, and still are, at stake. Moreover, Timothy Martinez criticizes Baudrillard's pessimistic prose as that which "serves to reinforce the sense of the inevitability and irresistibility of simulated realities"⁵ instead of providing necessary tools for resistance, while others might claim that Baudrillard's theory is a "politics of parody,"⁶ and that "despite [its] weaknesses... Baudrillard's critical project does cast new light on the problematics of postmodernism. And even with its flaws, this framework still is instructive for developing fresh insights into the workings of power and politics within informationalizing systems as they develop hyperreal

1 A. Keith Goshorn, "Valorizing the 'Feminine' while Rejecting Feminism?: Baudrillard's Feminist Provocations," *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*, ed. By Douglas Kellner (USA: Blackwell, 1995) 257.

2 Goshorn, p. 286.

3 Ian Almond, "Two Versions of Islam and the Apocalypse: The Persistence of Eschatology in Schlegel, Baudrillard and Zizek," in *Journal for Cultural Research*, vol.13 no.3-4 (Jul-Oct 2009): 309-321.

4 Aaron Schwabach, "Kosovo: Virtual War and International Law" in *Law and Literature*, vol.15, no.1 (2003) 10.

5 Timothy Martinez, "The Afterlife of Modernity in the Politics of the Postmodern," in *New Political Science*, vol.20 no.2 (1998) 205.

6 Dana Villa, "Postmodernism and the Public Sphere" in *The American Political Science Review*, vol.86, no.3 (September 1992) 719.

tendencies in their cultures and societies.”¹

Most of the defense for Baudrillard’s theory are anchored on a selective forgetfulness that attributes Baudrillard’s lack to his eccentricity, and pardons him for some of the useless exaggerations he offered. Richard Opalsky, much like Rojek and Turner, calls for a selective forgetting.² As a result, we are offered with a partial Baudrillard, edible only after breaking him down into pieces.

There are others, however, who would explain Baudrillard’s mistakes as deliberate strategies, that his inconsistencies are actually the charm and strength of his theories. Hegarty admits that the difficulty of putting Baudrillard’s theories to use could be considered as the very strength of his theory, that is, “his texts, [as] theoretical objects... resist critical interpretation and [also] encourage critical misinterpretations.”³ William Pawlett in his book, *Jean Baudrillard: Against Banality*, claims that, contrary to what Kellner calls as Baudrillard’s pataphysical break, if read from the concept of symbolic exchange, one would be able to see coherence in Baudrillard’s philosophy.⁴ Pawlett would even explain the inconsistencies and hyperbolic proclamations as Baudrillard’s attempt to pull back the world and reality from the unfolding banality caused by a simulated world. This symbolic lens Pawlett attributed to Baudrillard would allow Pawlett to explore other concepts such as violence without having to resort to the common conceptual binaries.⁵

As in his book,⁶ Rex Butler notes the interesting performance Baudrillard makes: the *double strategy* that enables one to follow Baudrillardian logic while criticizing the inconsistency in Baudrillard. According to Butler, this is evident in the philosopher’s *The Conspiracy of Art* where Baudrillard commits the same conspiracy, of being both “good” and “bad.” Butler cites the idea of parallax in Baudrillard’s works. It is the logical paradox that allows Baudrillard the tricky Mobius strip escape that adds to the genius of his theory. The content of his critique, which is that everything has become a shallow sign, is contradicted by the form his theory takes, which could be explained as the restoration of the disappearance.

1 Timothy Luke, “Power and Politics in Hyperreality: The Critical Project of Jean Baudrillard,” *The Social Science Journal*, Vol.28, no.3 (1991) 353.

2 See Richard Opalsky, *Spectacular Capitalism: Guy Debord and the Practice of Radical Philosophy*, London/ New York: Minor Compositions, 2011.

3 Hegarty, p.2.

4 See William Pawlett, *Jean Baudrillard: Against Banality*, New York: Routledge, 2007.

5 See William Pawlett, *Violence, Society, and Radical Theory: Bataille, Baudrillard, and Contemporary Society*, USA: Ashgate, 2013.

6 See Rex Butler, *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real*, London: SAGE, 1999.

This is what Butler considers as Baudrillard's tactic: the introduction of a split; one from the first-order of thought, and the other from the second-order. While Kellner, operating from the logic of critical theory, where there still is a desire for the restoration of dialectics, is undecided "whether [Baudrillard's] work should be read under the sign of truth or fiction,"¹ Butler, echoed by Victoria Grace,² insists that Baudrillard must be read "in his own terms."

Read as science fiction in the tradition of Philip K. Dick, William Gibson, Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, Baudrillard's dystopian society is convincing in the sense that it was able to foresee what the rationality of scientific progress failed to do. Read as a social analysis or a political forecast, the concept is too radical and irrational, that intellectual readers who are used to the Enlightenment's definition of "serious" theory, cannot picture a world of Baudrillard's scene.

Baudrillard's Theory as Fiction

Baudrillard offends and confuses because what he gives us is a theoretical terrorism. He challenges accepted beliefs of truth, reality, reason, language, political action and the privileged place of the subject through this reversibility, or what Butler calls "doubling." Baudrillard rejects compromise and instead accepts both sides unconditionally. In the opposition of epistemology, to either be rational or irrational, Baudrillard's strategy is to elude interpretation, to not be caught within the standards of the scientific test. In the opposition of politics, to either be the left or the right, Baudrillard calls for a terroristic hyper-conformity. In the opposition of the logic of sign, Baudrillard calls for poetry, a kind of fluid movement between sign and referent. In the opposition of real and theory, of truth and fiction, he proclaims the annihilation of the real.

Paul Sutton writes, "Baudrillard's intellectuality is one of provocation, exaggeration and excess... The hierarchical relation of opposites is pushed in one direction to a point of absolute extremity where it becomes the other and as such nullifies the opposite."³ Beyond the futile attempt to describe or mirror reality and beyond the hypocritical claim that one, indeed, was able to do this, Baudrillard claims that theory can never cross this distance to reality. The "simulated disorder of things" moves in a speed that makes impossible for theory to mirror it.⁴

1 Douglas Kellner (ed), "Introduction," *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader* (USA: Blackwell, 1995) 18.

2 See Victoria Grace, *Baudrillard's Challenge: A Feminist Reading*, London: Routledge, 2000.

3 Paul Sutton, "Jean Baudrillard: Transintellectual?," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 2:3 (1997) 194.

4 *The Perfect Crime*, p. 101.

Moreover, there are always radical uncertainties, things we do not expect because they were not catalogued in cause-effect normalcy. Hence, theory must be radical. It must be like lightning, anticipating an event that is less likely to happen.¹ Baudrillard says,

In my opinion, theory is simply a challenge to the real. A challenge to the world to exist...Theory is ahead of the state of things, that it moves too fast and thus is in a position of destiny with respect to what could happen...Theory is simulation.²

Baudrillard insists that theory, and the whole of his theory, is a challenge. It is a seduction, a game that does not really end. Much like science fiction, it is necessary for Baudrillard's theory to be excessive, fatal. But it was also necessary that the radical theory retain recognizable traces of reality, like the culture of consumption, some forms of simulation, etc. This way, the seduction is more effective. It lures us as close as possible.

In addition, his writing embodies the concepts and strategies that Baudrillard suggests. In fact, for him, there is no distance nor difference between his radical

1 In a sense, Adorno's idea of the non-finality of truth is similar to Baudrillard's premise for radical theory. Adorno writes: "Philosophy distinguishes itself from science not by a higher level of generality, as the banal view still today assumes, nor through the abstraction of its categories nor through the nature of its materials. The central difference lies far more in that the separate sciences accept their findings, as indestructible and static, whereas *philosophy perceives the first findings which it lights upon as a sign that needs unriddling*. Plainly put: the idea of science is research; that of *philosophy is interpretation*. In this remains the great, perhaps the everlasting paradox: philosophy persistently and with the claim of truth, must proceed interpretively without ever possessing a sure key to interpretation; nothing more is given to it than fleeting, disappearing traces within the riddle figures of that which exists and their astonishing entwinings." (Theodor Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. by Brian O'Connor (MA, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000): 30-31.) Adorno recognizes the fleeting character of reality; therefore, our interpretation of reality must keep up with the changes. Adorno insists that the task of philosophy is *interpretation*. The task of philosophy is to solve riddles, but not in a sense that there is one concrete answer. There is no hidden meaning that waits to be disclosed because truth is not only non-final. It is also a multiplicity. While Baudrillard may agree with Adorno that truth could be non-final and multiple, Baudrillard's social milieu is that of a fast-paced society. The speed of change brought about by new technology complicates philosophy's task of interpretation. In addition, these new technologies—what Mark Poster calls the mode of information—have changed the domains of reality. Our concept of what is real includes simulation and simulacra. Hence, Adorno's idea of philosophy's task of critical interpretation (of the now) becomes to Baudrillard the theory's (hyper)radical anticipation (of the not yet).

2 Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault: Forget Baudrillard* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1987):131-133, 124.

writing and radical theory. He writes: "Radical thought does not decipher. It anathematizes and anagrammatizes concepts and ideas just as poetic language does with words, and thanks to its reversible progression, it accounts simultaneously for meaning and the basic illusion of meaning."¹

As a performative gesture, Baudrillard's writing style is an attempt to liberate language and transgress the cage of signification logic, making language wild again.² At the same time, the fragmentary and uncommitted writing in *America* and *Cool Memories* is also in itself an experience of the TV screen, like Kerouac's car drive.³

Conclusion: Baudrillard and Danto

The way Baudrillard talks about theory, as something that does not attempt to mirror truth and reality, but as a simulation and a challenge, seems at first similar to how Danto conceives artistic theory as that which grants legitimacy to the postmodern art of Duchamp and Warhol. Danto's proclamation of the end of the art (as representation), is much like Baudrillard's proclamation of the end of politics, and the disappearance of the real. For Danto, it is theory that makes the artworld and art possible. Theory, then, becomes a bridge between the normative everyday-life and the realm of fiction and art. If prior to what Danto calls as the "post-historical state" of art, works of art have had a necessary place in normative society because works of art represent reality, incite resistance against real oppression, and so on, Danto argues that now, the development has made art retreat to the regions of fiction. The recognition we afford postmodern art is only possible because we accept that it is now theory that art represents, theory that art resists, and so on. And theory is a bridge because even if it is not "real," it is its mirror, its simulation.

What separates Baudrillard from Danto however is that Danto, standing at the plane of normativity looks at the world of art through the bridge of theory. Baudrillard's works seem to be the bridge itself. To read postmodern art is to read it the way Danto did, a temporary suspension for the sake of a different world. To read Baudrillard is to accept both worlds. For critics like Kellner who understand Baudrillard as an "intellectual," Baudrillard will forever be inconsistent. For critics like Rojek who compare Baudrillard's musings to Kerouac's, Baudrillard will be read as a detached postmodern writer, without political commitment. Rex Butler

1 Jean Baudrillard, "Radical Thought," trans. by David Macey, *Parallax*, 1:1 (1995), p.60.

2 Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories V* (London: Verso, 2006) 7.

3 See Bryan Turner, "Cruising America," *Forget Baudrillard?*, ed. Chris Rojek and Bryan Turner (London, Routledge, 1993): 146-160.

finds in Baudrillard a doubling effect that is characterized in his writing but is also a logic of the concept of postmodern society. Butler writes that Baudrillard's writing is both an imaginary solution and a real one, neither an empirical refutation of these systems of simulation which shares the same real as them, nor a pure fiction which bears no relationship to them. Rather, the defining quality of Baudrillard's work is that it is *both*.¹

The contemporary theorist or intellectual, for Baudrillard, must "say something more, something other, something different."² Perhaps, what we could learn from the schizophrenic character of Baudrillard's "theory" is that while the intellectual's task may be that of interpretation, this interpretation does not always come in the form of unriddling.³ Sometimes, the riddle too is interpretation.

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1 Butler, p. 122.

2 Jean Baudrillard, "Intellectuals, Commitment and Political Power," *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*, ed. Mike Gane, (London: Routledge, 1993) 79.

3 Here, I am deliberately misappropriating Theodor Adorno.

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