

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

Jean Baudrillard, a postmodernist who studies contemporary popular culture, says that commodities – the stuff you buy – are all signifiers. You buy stuff not necessarily because you will use it, or because it gives you pleasure, but because the stuff means something beyond itself – it is a signifier that points to a signified. That signified,

according to Baudrillard, is social status, or a subject position within a variety of social codes or models. Thus when you buy a car, you don't buy just any car to drive around in (which would be buying a commodity largely for use value); the car you buy is a signifier of your social position, your income level, your recreational habits, your political/environmental views, whether you have children, etc. So someone who buys a Mercedes is signifying something different from those who buy minivans or SUVs or hybrid gas/electric cars. What is being signified is in fact your position(s) as a subject; according to Baudrillard, identity (subjecthood) is thus a product of the signifiers with which one surrounds oneself, rather than something essential that is unique to each individual, as in the humanist model. Selfhood, for Baudrillard, as for Lacan, is thus always already an alienated position, something defined by externals.

Baudrillard takes this idea of the signifier–signified relationship further in discussing one of his best-known ideas, the concept of the *simulacrum*. He starts with the idea that the signifier–signified relationship is a relationship of a symbol to a notion of 'reality' – signifiers are representations (words, pictures, symbols, whatever) that point to something beyond or outside of themselves, something which supposedly has a reality of its own, regardless of how it is represented. A chair, for instance, just is, whether we designate it by the word 'chair' or by some other signifier; the object with four legs and a seat continues to exist no matter what we call it, or even whether we call it anything. In the world of mass media which Baudrillard studies, however, there is no signified, no reality, no level of simple existence to which signifiers refer. Rather, Baudrillard says, there are only signifiers with no signifieds; there are only pictures of chairs without any real chairs ever being referred to or existing. He calls this separation of signifier from signified a 'simulacrum,' a representation without an original that it copies. Simulacra (the plural of simulacrum) don't mirror or reproduce or imitate or copy reality: they *are* reality itself, says Baudrillard.

In Western thought since Plato, Baudrillard points out, the idea of an original or real thing has always been favored over the idea of an imitation or a copy. This is particularly evident in the arts, where an original painting, or a first edition, is worth a lot of money, while a reproduction (a print, a second or eighteenth edition) is worth very little. In the postmodern world of mass media, however, the original largely disappears, and only copies exist. An example of this is music

CDs: there is no 'original' master version of any music CD, but only thousands and thousands of copies, all identical, all equal in value. Think also about xerox copies: when I make a hundred copies of this typed page, I have an 'original,' but there's no difference between my original and any of the copies – so the 'original' page that came out of my printer is no different from any of the copies that came out of the copier. Mass-mediated forms of communication in postmodern culture revolve around this idea of simulacra, of imitations and copies with no original. This is why Andy Warhol, and his mass produced images of Campbell's soup cans and Marilyn Monroe, is often classified as a postmodern artist.

Simulacra, as signifiers with no signifieds, produce what we know as 'reality,' according to Baudrillard; mass media disseminate these simulacra everywhere, constantly, so that they are unavoidable and inescapable. The simulacra forever being projected at viewers by the mass media provide what Baudrillard calls 'codes' or 'models' which tell us (viewers, consumers) what and how to think, act, believe, buy, desire, hate, etc. Humans in postmodern culture occupy passive subject positions within these codes or models; this idea is similar to Althusser's notion of how ideologies interpellate subjects, but Baudrillard is not following either structuralist or Marxist 'grand narratives' in formulating his theories.

A simulacrum creates a passive subject who takes the simulation as the only necessary reality; a kid playing a race-car video game who then gets behind the wheel of a 'real' car may not be able to tell the difference between the two experiences of 'driving.' The lack of distinction between game and reality is another feature of post-modern culture, one which is illustrated in a host of movies, starting with *War Games* (1983), where a computer simulation of nuclear war threatens to start a real nuclear war, and including all the installments of the movie *The Matrix*. Another example of the collapse between image and reality can be found in such pop figures as Madonna and Michael Jackson, who exist as all image, all 'surface,' all signifier. A humanist investigation of either of these two people would look for the 'real person' behind the glitzy image; a postmodern investigation of Madonna and Michael Jackson would assume that there was no 'real person' behind the image, and that the image itself was all that mattered.

When the image is more 'real' than any other 'reality,' where there is only surface but no depth, only signifiers with no signifieds, only

imitations with no originals, Baudrillard says, we are in the realm of *hyperreality*. One of the best examples of such a hyperreality is Disneyland, which is a minutely created 'reality' of things that don't exist in the modern version of the 'real world.' For postmodern theorists, the hyperreality of the created worlds becomes more 'real' than the real world, and in fact highlights how what we have always thought of as the 'real world' is itself a constructed hyperreality.

My favorite example of this is the movie *Wag the Dog*, subtitled 'A comedy about truth, justice, and other special effects.' The movie tells a story about a president who is caught in a sexually compromising situation with a girl scout. To keep this story from being the headline news for the next number of months, the president hires a Hollywood producer to film a 'war' with Albania, and to broadcast that on the evening news as if it were really happening. 'Truth' thus becomes a 'special effect,' something created by visual images in film and on TV; what is on the screen is truer, more real, than what is 'really' happening off camera, and the (passive) viewing public takes it as such. What's funny in the movie, though, is what Baudrillard and other postmodern theorists say is happening all the time. Whenever you watch the news on TV, how do you know that the film clips you're seeing represent something that's 'really' happening, and are not just produced like a sit-com or made-for-TV movie? Baudrillard and others would say you can't know, and in fact there can be no difference between 'reality' and its representation: what's on TV is what is 'real,' is the only reality we can know.

In addition to its focus on the social constructions of 'reality,' postmodernist theory also examines questions of the organization of knowledge. In modern societies, knowledge was equated with science, and was contrasted to narrative; science was good knowledge, and narrative was bad, primitive, irrational (and thus associated with women, children, primitives, and insane people). Knowledge, however, was good for its own sake; one gained knowledge, via education, in order to be knowledgeable in general, to become an educated person. This is the ideal of the liberal arts education. In a postmodern society, however, knowledge becomes functional – you learn things, not to know them, but to use that knowledge. Educational policy today puts emphasis on skills and training, rather than on a vague humanist ideal of education in general.

Not only is knowledge in postmodern societies characterized by its utility, but knowledge is also distributed, stored, and arranged

differently in postmodern societies than in modern ones. Specifically, the advent of electronic computer technologies has revolutionized the modes of knowledge production, distribution, and consumption in our society. (indeed, some might argue that postmodernism is best described by, and correlated with, the emergence of computer technology, starting in the 1960s, as the dominant force in all aspects of social life). In postmodern societies, anything which is not able to be translated into a form recognizable and storable by a computer – i.e. anything that's not digitizable – will cease to be knowledge. In this paradigm, the opposite of 'knowledge' is not 'ignorance,' as it is the modern/humanist paradigm, but rather 'noise.' Anything that doesn't qualify as a kind of knowledge is 'noise,' is something that is not recognizable as anything within this system.