

# Media essays - baudrillard media terrorism



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## **Baudrillard Media Terrorism**

Discuss Baudrillard's controversial contention that Western media have been complicit in terrorism. What does he mean and how convincing is his argument?

Jean Baudrillard was an influential but highly controversial French Philosopher, Sociologist and cultural theorist. The " prophet of the postmodern media spectacle" (Butterfield: 2002) best known for his work on contemporary social theory, the modes of mediation and technological communication (Kellner: 1994: 1), commenting in particular on AIDS, cloning, the first Gulf War and terrorism. Baudrillard's writings and his almost confrontational view have led to him being fiercely criticised by many, giving him nicknames such as " the high priest of post-modernism" (Gane: 1991: 47) and " the David Bowie of Philosophy" (Merrin: 2005a: 5).

His continual TV appearances, tours and newspaper coverage only reinforced his critics " suspicion of his superficiality" (Merrin: 2005a: 6). Overall his theories were regarded as old hat up until 9/11 and the World Trade Centre terrorist attacks, where his writings on the matter once again put him in the spotlight, although not all agreed with what he has to say none could help but take note. Before I get into Baudrillard's writings on terrorism it is important to outline some of his earlier works and theories, so you get a good scope of the man's thinking's and view of the world in which we live in.

An important point, central to all Baudrillard's theories is his concern over the importance of images within contemporary culture. He builds upon Plato's allegory of the cave, in which he compares the world's population to cave

dwellers, viewing false reality instead of absolute truth, in the form of shadows on the wall. Baudrillard takes inspiration from this idea, as well as the work of Lev Manovich, to come up with a theory which has been described as “inverted Platonism” (Stam: 2000: 306).

In “Plato’s Cave” the cave dwellers, shackled to the wall, naively view the shadows cast on the back wall as actuality as they have never seen anything other than that, they never experience the absolute truth only the manufactured truth. Baudrillard takes this one step further though by “denying the existence of any actuality or reality that may be revealed” (Plantinga: 1996: 307), arguing that there is no protocols now in place which can help us distinguish between appearances and reality.

Baudrillard states that we are stuck in a postmodern “hyper-reality”, where ‘truth’ is “simply the latest media consensus” (Plantinga: 1996: 307). The televisions, images and mass media which have now replaced Plato’s cave wall have become a means not of informing and revealing truth but of taking part in the creation of the manufactured consensus which passes as truth and knowledge in the postmodern world (Plantinga: 1996: 307). The real has almost completely disappeared, with any glimmer of absolute truth overshadowed by media simulation.

In his book *Simulacra and Simulation* Baudrillard looks at the West’s relationship between reality and images. He claims that modern society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that humans are experiencing a simulation of reality rather than reality itself. This is an idea famously explored in the Wachowski brothers film *The Matrix* (1999),

with the character Morpheus referring to the real world as the “desert of the real” (Baudrillard: 1994: 1), a reference lifted straight from Baudrillard's work. Baudrillard has since claimed in interview that *The Matrix* is nothing more than a misunderstanding of his work (Lancelin: 2004). The simulacra that Baudrillard refers to are signs of culture and media that create the perceived reality, serving as a powerful form of “social control” (Baudrillard: 1993a: 60), and can be divided into four discreet semiotic stages.

Before simulacra, in pre-modern societies signs are few in number and simply refer to and reflect reality. Their primary purpose is to reflect a divinely sanctioned hierarchy and social positioning (Barker: 1996: 50), rigid and firmly fixed in place. Religious paintings such as those of Jesus or the Virgin Mary are held to be true copies of a higher reality, which people can worship like they are the real thing, disregarding the fact that they are nothing but a replica.

The so called First Order of Simulacra stretches through the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, during the Renaissance period. Baudrillard states that during this *counterfeit* time we changed from being a limited order of signs, “to a proliferation of signs according to demand” (1983: 85).

As religious views and sanctioned hierarchy begin to fade, man-made copies of the real world start to be produced on mass. For the first time during this period we get signs splitting away from reality, the truth can be altered and changed to suit different purposes, creating false copies which are not representable.

The third stage and Second Order of Simulacra came as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, where advances in mechanical production in things such as cameras and printers radically changed the relationship between signs and the real. At this stage an “ industrial law of value” (Smart: 1993: 52) reigns, where technological and mechanical reproduction come to constitute a new reality.

The more these signs multiply, the more their relationship with the real is undermined. As Walter Benjamin once said images become the things themselves, absorbing “ the process of production, changing it finalities and altering the status of product and producer” (Baudrillard: 1983: 98). The reproductions dilute the experience of the unique image, they lose the special value associated with the unique and authentic, instead acquiring a much more abstract kind of value.

Baudrillard’s Third Order of Simulacra is where we are at now. In our contemporary postmodern societies, images have floated free of reality, taking the processes of abstraction which took hold in industrial modernity to their extremes. As Baudrillard says “ one is not the simulacrum of which the other would be the real: there are only simulacra” (1994: 21).

The copy has now become the real, with nothing authentic left behind the simulation. It is no longer possible to appeal to a real referent, as distinctions between representations and objects can no longer be sustained in a world where simulation models rule (Smart: 1993: 52).

Baudrillard’s work explores the paradoxes of post-modern, simulation culture, stating that we have now got to a stage where the simulations

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merely refer to other simulations. As he sees it we can no longer experience anything outside the codes of simulation, the boundaries between signification and reality have imploded, so now all we can experience are representations of representations.

According to Baudrillard reality has either disappeared or never existed in the first place. This death of reality has caused enormous panic amongst our post-modern culture as we attempt to nostalgically resurrect and retrieve the real. We find evidence of these attempts to search for authenticity everywhere, as Baudrillard says “ when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes it full meaning” (2001: 174). The rise of myths of origin, second-hand truth and objectivity, lead to an escalation of the true lived experience, which grows into a demand for things which are more and more real.

Baudrillard defines this obsessing of the real as “ hyperreality” (1995: 28), with it in fact taking us further away, rather than closer to the real. We as a postmodern culture never stop on our search for more reality, through things such as DVD deleted scenes and commentaries, and the watchings of documentary series such as *Bodyshock* and *Extraordinary People* , with their less than subtitle titles, we attempt to come closer with ‘ reality’, but once again we are just one step closer to a media fabrication.

Baudrillards views reject those of traditional Marxist productivism, with him thinking they no longer offer an adequate explanation to postmodern situations. He has turned to theorists who look at formulating an alternative notion of economy and culture, based on observations of primitive societies,

in particular the work of Georges Bataille. Bataille's notion of the "solar economy" (1997: 193) of excess and destruction argued that there is a more fundamental, primary form of economy which could be taken straight from primitive society.

Baudrillard also studied the work of Marcel Mauss, with his theories on gift-giving. Mauss states that there was no "pure expenditure" (Mauss: 2001: 98) without the expectation of a replicating "counter-gift" (Mauss: 1998: 101). This "symbolic exchange" between gift and counter-gift becomes the law of the universe, the challenge to give.

Baudrillard refers to the semiotic culture in which we live as "the code" (2001: 7), where control has been taken from the realm of decision-making. Where our Western binaristic semiotic culture rests largely on binary opposites, good and evil, life and death, etc, societies based on symbolic exchange do not. Everyday life deals with symbolic offerings of gifts to the dead, and they are expected to respond as a matter of obligation. I

n western semiotic culture, our choices are defined in terms of yes/no decisions, binaristic regulations which displace real choice, pepsi or coke, Manchester United or Manchester City, for example. When Baudrillard refers to an event as symbolic he means that it is a gift, and thus demands a counter-gift in return, resulting in a challenge. 9/11 was the largest example of this symbolic challenge, and perhaps "the most potent symbolic event since the crucifixion of Christ" (Butterfield: 2002), where the terrorists gave a gift to the west in the form of terrorism, so there was no alternative than for the gift to be countered.

Baudrillard stated that the erection of the twin towers “ signifies the end of competition” (1993a: 69) and the monopoly of binary logic. Where before the Manhattan skyline had been filled with skyscrapers all competing with each other for our attention, the World Trade Centre with its two identical towers put an end to it, they where both the yes and the no.

William Merrin says that Baudrillard is “ motivated by his belief in the radical presence and possibility of symbolic forces opposing, spiralling with and irrupting within the semiotic culture” (2005b). His views have never differed from those that semiotic culture has never truly freed itself from older symbolic culture, with the symbolic operating within the semiotic. We need to break out of this yes/no culture and find the symbolic within and outside culture. For Baudrillard it is this outside culture, notably Islam, which threatens the Western semiotic system.

Although his theory has been attacked as “ an imaginary construct which tries to seduce the world to become as theory wants it to be” (Kellner: 1989: 178), Baudrillard claims that the media itself creates many of the worlds events, and thus are actually ‘ non-events’ as they are creations of simulation. Things such as Reality TV and celebrity news create a large number of these hyperreal non-events, which just wouldn’t happen without the media.

We as media consumer’s infact crave real events to happen, even going as far as to fantasize about them. Films such as *Cloverfield*, *The Siege* and *Day After Tomorrow*, show our secret fantasies of mass destruction and death, which creep into our mundane lives. With the rise of these non-events comes



the rise of 'fateful events', in the same way simulation triggers a quest for the real. The death of Princess Diana was the result of a media circus, reality TV which created both a non-event and a "secret exhilaration" (Merrin: 2005b)

In the same way as Diana's death, 9/11 was a non-event in the sense that it was experienced as a hyperreal image and embraced as a media event. The buildings were chosen as targets due to their media prominence, relating to films and previous fantasies of destructions. It was however also, as Baudrillard calls it, an "absolute event" (2003: 41) in that it testified to some secret symbolic sense of fate in Western culture.

For Baudrillard "in the end it was they who did it but we who wished it" (2003: 5), the terrorists were just "pushing that which already wants to fall" (1993b: 209). Baudrillard sees this terrorism as being produced by the repression of the symbolic, with it returning, infiltrating and destroying us like a virus. The closer the western project of globalisation gets to perfection, the more we will see resistant symbolic challenges. Baudrillard says that the more cursed gifts of westernisation we give out the more counter-gifts we will receive in the form of sacrificial death. 9/11 is a paradox, Islam's counter-gift to the west.

The west has responded in the only way they know how, as a semiotic culture, by going to war. Although it was not as simple as yes/no, good/evil, this is how it was responded to, conceived in binary, systematic terms. As Baudrillard states "if we hope to understand anything we will need to get

beyond Good and Evil” (2002), this was much more than just a clash of civilisations; it was gift giving at its most destructive.

Jean Baudrillard sets out to be provocative in his work, he wants to stand out and make people take note of him, even if it's for all the wrong reasons. He describes himself as a “terrorist and nihilist in theory as the others are with their weapons” (1994: 163), noting that change must be brought upon our postmodern society, although not through means of violence.

For Baudrillard it is our semiotic culture that have given rise to terrorism, through its imposing of our values on other cultures and mass media fantasization of our own destruction, so we must accept the returning gift of terror which comes with that. As Baudrillard says, the only thing which is not acceptable about terrorism is the violence behind it, “theoretical violence, not truth, is the only recourse left to us” (1994: 163). Through his work he was trying to do what the terrorists were, just without killing anyone.

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