

The Collapse of the Real and the Fatality of the Subject in Baudrillard's Philosophical Thought

Ledian Rusta

University of Tirana, Albania

Abstract

Baudrillard's thought constitutes a particular philosophical perspective on the postmodern era. The methodology used in this paper is based on the text analysis of some of Baudrillard's major works. From this perspective, a particular vision for the establishment of a new philosophical critique will be presented. Many of the previous philosophical theories do not correspond to today's reality based on the world of signs and virtuality and are therefore considered not actual. Consequently, traditional philosophical critiques are incapable of understanding and providing ideas for analyzing social reality. Baudrillard addresses a conception about the reality that is in the possession of objects. The subject has died giving way to the logic of the system of objects based on a virtual and simulated reality. Faced with this situation, a new condition of thought is needed to address criticism of the system.

Today, reality has been transformed into a hyperreality where the differences and dialectics of reality are indistinguishable. Everything is a simulation that produces infinitely the same sign and code. The subject does not possess the power to rule and understand reality as it is determined by the particular logic of objects: repetition and simulation. This conclusion pushes Baudrillard into an ontological fatality and pessimism where there is no social resistance. It seems that reality has fallen into a spiral that repeats and multiplies the simulated signs. Therefore, Baudrillard's attempt should be read as a tendency to definitively deny the illusion of an emancipatory critique and the hope for a social revolution.

Keywords: critique, code, sign, simulation, virtuality

1. Introduction

The classical critique of philosophy about the social, addressed mainly by Marx, speaks of the phenomenon of alienation when the individual entered into certain relations with the world and material products. This criticism was based on the exchange-value/use-value relation of the products. The main concern was directed by the question "How are material goods produced and what kind of relation does the individual create with them?": The answer to this question implied the alienation of the individual represented in the material sphere between value of production and exchange. According to this critique, social contradiction appears among the material and the spiritual, appearance and essence, object and subject, as two separate and distinct worlds. But in Baudrillard's view, Marx's critique is, at best, nonactual. The new conditions of social and political reality in the postmodern situation require a new critique and approach. The new reality demands that it no longer continue with "weapons criticism" but with a "new weapon for criticism" as today's reality is constructed on the collapse of the old

order: the end of the previous order in all its elements. *The end of labour. The end of production. The end of political economy. The end of the signifier/signified dialectic which facilitates the accumulation of knowledge and meaning, the linear syntagma of cumulative discourse. And at the same time, the end of the exchange-value/use-value dialectic which is the only thing that makes accumulation and social production possible. The end of the linear dimension of discourse. The end of the linear dimension of the commodity. The end of the classical era of the sign. The end of the era of production*" (Baudrillard, 1993). We are already witnessing an era where all instruments, forms and relations have become simulations and signs of the social position where production is articulated in the consumerist system of the capitalist economy. In the social sense, we have a shift from the society of the production of goods to the production of codes and signs. *"The code designates the smallest simple element, the minimal formula to which an entire individual can be reduced, and in such a way that he can only reproduce himself identically to himself"* (Baudrillard, 1994). Code is the vector that governs and directs the entire social and political reality. So, we have a transcendence of the social and ontological condition that shifts from the material to the immaterial, from the physical to the virtual. Everything that existed in the classical era as material traces has been converted into virtuality and sign. This situation does not represent an objective idealism but a vital semiological idealism where entities such as labor, energy, desire, sexuality, the unconscious, etc., are not productive forces but code action variables that materialize as social institutions and practices. Therefore, Baudrillard thinks as non actual, the criticisms of classical economics as long as *"you can't fight the code with political economy, nor with 'revolution'"* (Baudrillard, 1993a). So what seems cynical about the classical critique of political economy, according to Baudrillard, is not the fact that it appears incomplete but being unrealistic creates the illusory hope of revolutionizing the social system. Exactly, it is Baudrillard's critique that appears to be revolutionary because it emphasizes this shortcoming.

2. Social and power order in the traces of simulacrum and virtuality

Simulacra constitutes a fundamental concept for Baudrillard in the analysis of the social and the form of its organization in a given historical epoch. It constitutes something that replaces reality with its representation. *"Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal...It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes"* (Baudrillard, 1994). The radical conditions of the postmodern situation have completely changed the logic of the existence of the social and political system by overturning the meanings of the categories of modernity: real vs. unreal. For Baudrillard, reality is no longer expressed as a reference that produces difference but takes the place of a radical manifestation of it, a new kind of realism: hyperreal and hyperreality. *"At the end of this process of reproducibility, the real is not only that which can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: the hyperreal"* (Baudrillard, 1993). The reality in the postmodern era does not resemble the dialectical perspective of change and difference but the rule of the tautology: the endless reproduction of the sameness. But this situation displays an even more threatening element: illusion. In the capitalist order of signs it seems that everything erupts in the form of illusory differences where even material products seem to be personalized. However, these differences are not the result

of a free dialectic but are pre-programmed as such by the virtual system. Under these circumstances, the contradictions and individuality presented, show the illusion of change by cultivating vain hope for social revolution. So the purpose of displaying differences is predetermined and pre-programmed by the virtual system, and the hope for social revolution is also simulated. In this sense, the hope of a true revolution is impossible because the everyday life from which the defects were discovered, *“embodies the simulated dimension of hyper-realism”* (Baudrillard 1983a). This is also evident in the aesthetic criticism which has been considered as the last refuge for exercising a critical attitude against the system. *“The cool universe of digitality has absorbed the world of metaphor and metonymy. The principle of simulation wins out over the reality principle just as over the principle of pleasure”* (Baudrillard, 1983a). This total rule and control of the system *“in a field unhinged by simulation, then all determination evaporates, every act terminates at the end of the cycle having benefited everyone and been scattered in all directions”*(Baudrillard,1983a) leaving behind no trace previously unprogrammed by system logic.

On the other hand, today's social reality reveals a new moment at the energy level. As modernity is oriented towards the explosion of social differences, postmodernity shows the opposite direction: implosion. This new logic of the action of energy in social reality represents the form of reproduction of the sameness: the infinite reproduction of the same and the dissolution of causality. *“An IMPLOSION - an absorption of the radiating model of causality, of the differential mode of determination, with its positive and negative electricity - an implosion of meaning. This is where simulation begins”* (Baudrillard,1983a).

Meanwhile, the situation is complicated if we analyze the form of exercising power in this virtual reality. In today's postmodern situation, power has changed radically and no longer stands in the vectors of material economy and the state, as solid institutional forces. In the society of simulations, power is established in simulations and not in physical or material relations. For example, a politician does not lead through political analysis, expertise and political action, but through simulations produced by the media as a display of signs of power. Power relations are virtual and represented as simulated signs. In this sense, power appears in every sign and code presented, that impact society on the element of social mass. One of the typical responses that the individual produces towards politics is politically non-representation and passivity as a psychological sign of survival. *“The masses are no longer a referent because they no longer belong to the order of representation. They don't express themselves, they are surveyed. They don't reflect upon themselves, they are tested. The referendum (and the media are a constant referendum of directed questions and answers) has been substituted for the political referent. Now polls, tests, the referendum, media are devices which no longer belong to a dimension of representations, but to one of simulation”* (Baudrillard, 1983b).

However, the game of legitimacy politically demands the answer of the mass as it lays the foundation for the existence of political power. For this reason, the system desperately seeks to constantly produce the social, by producing a stalemate. Political legitimacy seeks to produce the social but in reality it constantly produces the passive mass that is accelerated by the influence of the media. *“Instead of transforming the mass into energy, information produces even more mass. Instead of informing as it claims, instead of giving form and structure, information neutralises even further the "social field"; more and more it creates an inert mass impermeable to the classical institutions of the social, and to the very contents of information”* (Baudrillard, 1983b). For this reason, Baudrillard is separated from the classical view that the media manipulate or socialize the masses, because they actually annihilate them.

3. Fatal strategies and revenge of the object

If we look at Baudrillard's language and metaphorical concepts, we realize that his approach not only describes reality but also constitutes a political attitude. In the work *Fatal Strategies* he describes the orbit of the development of the logic of objects in the dimension of an evolution where they exceed the known and defined limits of material reality. Today's social reality that appears in a simulated and virtual form, shows the impossibility to rationalize objects, to understand or rule them. It is this aspect that has evaporated the dialectic between object and subject that was traditionally conceived according to a tension where one passed from one order to another: from the order of the subject to the object and vice versa. Nowadays *"the world is not dialectical—it is sworn to extremes, not to equilibrium, sworn to radical antagonism, not to reconciliation or synthesis. This is also the principle of Evil, as expressed in the "evil genie" of the object, in the ecstatic form of the pure object and in its strategy, victorious over that of the subject"* (Baudrillard, 2008). This situation of the explosion of objects constitutes the triumph and capitulation of the subject: his death. However, this death is radical as it does not simply mean the dissolution of the subject, but his powerlessness to distinguish himself from the objects. Boundless multiplication signs and virtuality gain total control over the individual according to the principle of inertia without point of return. The individual is powerless to stop this inertial situation as his conscience and action is pre-programmed by the system of virtuality. In contrast to modernity, where the individual sought to control and subjugate the world through the manipulation of mechanical technology, in postmodernity, the subject becomes a sign and virtuality due to the triumph of the sign-object. In this sense, the world of virtual signs triumphs over the individual as a hyperreality. History as a social and political history is the history of the representation of virtual signs that rule over the individual as fashion, show, sexual objects, information, codes, etc. Objects now run in full sovereignty and *"the position of the subject has become simply untenable and where the only possible position is that of the object"* (Baudrillard, 2008).

In this regard, the objects create a particular strategy, under the name of "fatal strategies". The latter is not based on instances as subject, reality, revolution, as they are beyond human control. *"Fatal strategies themselves differ from other such techniques, such as Machiavelli's or Sun Tzu's, in that they are not about securing the sovereignty or prosperity of the subject, but are deployed by enigmatic forces to us: evil genies, sly objects, ironic events, and spanners in the works which escape the centripetal will and best laid plan's of the individual "* (Baudrillard, 2008).

In the epistemic sense of understanding reality this is also fatal for scientific research in the humanities as objects resist critical observation and analysis by responding through rejection and apathy. Pushed to the extreme, this process produces a collapse of the end reality system that appeals to an extreme understanding. Therefore, for Baudrillard *"it is not Evil that is interesting, it's the spiral of worsening"* (Baudrillard, 2008). This ontological conclusion kills the hope of any revolution or social liberation. The death of the subject and the triumph of the world of objects makes the dream of revolution illusory. Indeed, Baudrillard speaks of a predestination, a prophecy of reality. *"Contrary to our whole virtuous morality, things have a predestined linkage. Instead of deploying according to a genesis and an evolution, they inscribe themselves in advance in their disappearance. It is prophecy that distinguishes them, not foresight"* (Baudrillard, 2008). Precisely this conclusion creates a special antihumanism that privileges the ontology of the object, the signs, the simulations, as opposed to the ontology of the subject. In this new antihumanism, reality is created as a relation between signs and

simulations and not as a product of creation by the subject. The supremacy of the nonhuman (objects) over the human (subject) is proclaimed. This new radical antihumanism is based on the motto of social and political action: “*Long live the nonhuman*”.

4. Conclusion

Baudrillard's thought can be read as the last chapter of the philosophical pessimistic attitude regarding the conception of reality. Yet he displays a realistic perspective when criticizing the strategies, and categories used so far by philosophy as unactual to the conditions of today's postmodern situation. In this respect, Baudrillard's thought dissolves the illusions constructed by modern philosophical thought of calling its instruments unrealistic. And although the system of reality has fallen into an irreversible inertia, where the logic of objects reigns, its critique is seen as an attempt to revolutionize the means of critique: the theory about reality.

References

- Baudrillard, J. (1983a). *Simulations*. New York:Semiotext(e).
- Baudrillard, J. (1983b). *In the shadow of the silent majorities or, the end of the social order and other essays*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Baudrillard, J. (1993). *Symbolic Exchange and death*. California: Sage.
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.
- Baudrillard, J. (2008). *Fatal strategies*. New York: Semiotext(e).