

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/48169442>

BAUDRILLARD: WORK AND HYPERREALITY

Article · January 2010

Source: OAI

CITATIONS

16

READS

22,342

1 author:



[Hermano Roberto Thiry-Cherques](#)

Fundação Getulio Vargas

30 PUBLICATIONS 321 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Thiry-Cherques, Hermano Roberto

BAUDRILLARD: WORK AND HYPERREALITY
RAE Eletrônica, vol. 9, núm. 1, enero-junio, 2010
Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo
Brasil

Disponible en: <http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/src/inicio/ArtPdfRed.jsp?iCve=205115349010>

The logo for RAE eletrônica, with 'RAE' in a large, bold, serif font and 'eletrônica' in a smaller, lowercase, sans-serif font, all contained within a dark grey rectangular background.

RAE Eletrônica

rae@fgv.br

Escola de Administração de Empresas de São

Paulo

Brasil

¿Cómo citar?

Número completo

Más información del artículo

Página de la revista

ESSAYS

BAUDRILLARD: WORK AND HYPERREALITY

Hermano Roberto Thiry-Cherques

Professor da Escola Brasileira de Administração Pública, Fundação Getulio Vargas – Rio de Janeiro – RJ, Brasil

RAE-eletrônica, v. 9, n. 1, Art. 7, jan./jun. 2010.

<http://www.rae.com.br/eletronica/index.cfm?FuseAction=Artigo&ID=5638&Secao=PENSATA&Volume=9&Numero=1&Ano=2010>

©Copyright 2010 FGV-EAESP/RAE-eletrônica. Todos os direitos reservados. Permitida a citação parcial, desde que identificada a fonte. Proibida a reprodução total. Em caso de dúvidas, consulte a Redação: raeredacao@fgv.br; 55 (11) 3799-7898.



FUNDAÇÃO
GETULIO VARGAS



Escola de Administração
de Empresas de São Paulo

BAUDRILLARD: WORK AND HYPERREALITY

Jean Baudrillard (Reims, July 27, 1929 – Paris, March 6, 2007), French sociologist, poet, photographer and philosopher, was never an academic. He failed his *agrégation* exam (for a high school teacher job), and did not hold a position in a university. He was a structuralist, having adapted structuralism to understand the limit between reality and imagination. He engaged in the study of the impact of media and technology in contemporary life.

Without minding criticisms against his style of expression and the concepts that he invented (King, 1998), Baudrillard tried to demonstrate how today's culture is the result of a constructed reality or "hyperreality". He questioned the domination imposed by systems of signs, the "symbolic value" which replaced the exchange value and the use value as drivers of economy and society.

Baudrillard argued that the continuous expansion of the sign structure of domination demanded the establishment of information networks and a technological system which substantially changed contemporary rationality, thought and action. He attributed such change to media intoxication, which generated the loss of identity references, which were made servants of a technological feudalism which has no other purpose except its own self-perpetuation.

In this essay, I will summarize Baudrillard's position on work in contemporary economy and society. I will examine how Baudrillard described, from the concept of consumer society, work as an essential part of rationality of the simulacrum, in which productive effort was replaced by the codes of hyperreality.

CONSUMPTION

Baudrillard's core idea is that an object has a symbolic value in addition to its use value and exchange value. Hyperreality, the virtual reality in which we live, structured by information and technology, is sustained on an amalgamation of elements which were previously separate, such as production and consumption, and by a dissipation of the system of values based on the illusion that economy and society have a defined meaning or any meaning at all (Baudrillard, 2001).

Baudrillard's theory on work was built gradually. In *The System of Objects* (1968), he methodically analyzed the relationship between humans and objects in a consumer society. He described how a "level of rationality of the object" engenders a meaning beyond its use, and so the system, which was previously technologically consistent, is no longer. The symbolic dimension caused

the functional value to be replaced by a functional convention. The subjectivity of the attribution of value caused a meta-functionality in electronic medium, a function beyond its limits which, symbolically manipulated by advertising, resulted in an irresponsibility of the consumer for what he consumes.

In the transition from an industrial (“metallurgic”) society to a symbolic (“semiurgic”) society, Baudrillard saw the work being conditioned to competition and to “personalization” (customization). Competition, under the sign of a purported freedom, transited from production to consumption. Being free is now “being able to consume whatever one desires.” Personalization created the illusion of originality, or exercise of a personal preference. In work, it established the illusion of a free choice of occupation.

In the semiurgic society, the object lost its use value and its exchange value and reappeared as a function or sign value. The interest is not in the objects but in the system of signs which mirrors them. The sign or syntax is disassociated from the product and attaches to the end. To understand the contemporary world is to understand the message contained in its underlying system of signs. Then Baudrillard proceeded to a critique of the political economy of the sign not from productivity, but from “consumity” or consumption capacity. Consumption changes the signs and serves economy. As in the digestive process, the system needs the acquisition of goods and services to reproduce itself. Therefore, rationality was inverted, changing from the rationality of production to the rationality of consumption.

Considering neither use nor exchange (the commodity), but the sign, implies to seek, instead of utility, the sign that the commodity conveys, the distinction, hierarchy and position in a society ruled by consumption. In *The Consumer Society* (1970, pp. 242-246), Baudrillard retrieved and synthesized his thought on work. Instead of buying and selling our working time, we now must buy spare time so that we may consume it. It is consumption, not production, that rules work. Work is not only a necessity, but an economic and cultural imposition.

This is another illusion: spare time is the freedom to lose or kill time. The real value of time is to be lost. What makes us gain time is its empty use, is the truly spare time. But in consumer society, leisure time is consumed. It integrates the production system and follows an alienating logic. It creates a false identity, which is different from the identity denied by work.

Leisure is a work. It became a waste, a byproduct of productive time. Leisure reproduces all constraints of productive time. It is idle time, but not free. Idleness, which was characteristic of the wealthy classes, became the “consumption” of useless time. Leisure generates a regression to past forms of work (bricolage, collecting, fishing, etc.).

Leisure is a duty. Measured (vacation) time is not free, but attached to its distinction as an abstracted production time. Work is opposed to leisure, but leisure is not free. Non-working time is not a time for calmness, escape from the fatigue of working life, or rest, but acquisition time. What we call leisure is measured time, a time that does not exist in primitive societies; a holiday or vacation time. One must do things and go places. It is a non-productive time, but it generates values (status, prestige, etc.). It is neither work nor rest (Jung, 2000).

Spare time has to be gained, whether by buying it with work or by saving work with technology and productivity. Leisure is the consumption of non-productive time. Leisure time is not free because we cannot lose it by simply doing nothing. In other words, we need to produce without meaning (a hobby) or consume without need (tourism).

We live and work in the ambiguous and in the imaginary. A shopping mall is the utmost symbol of the sublimation of reality, both in the sense of “sublimation” in physics, of a direct change from the solid phase to the gas phase, and in psychoanalysis, of transformation of an impulse in a socially acceptable act. In a mall, money is made of plastic, the weather and light are artificially controlled, food and entertainment are permanently available and life is domesticated. All the complexity of human existence (the separation between work, leisure, nature and culture) became history. Everything has been digested and reduced to one and the same emptiness.

In the consumer society, value is in the ideas, or in the signs of objects. Value is in the meaning that an object gives to existence, which is supplied from outside, culturally conditioned, codified and introjected by the media. The objects acquired are not those produced by the worker. He does not choose his clothing, living or transportation objects, but they are imposed by advertising. The technology of entertainment is the same as the technology of work. It follows a seduction scheme. It assumes a rational free choice, but there is neither choice nor liberation through consumption.

Identities have ceased to be working identities (what one does for a living) and became consumer identities (how one lives). Individual relationships are relationships with groups. Satisfaction mixes with conformity. But the worker is not a passive victim of the system. He is a participant in the system. He is not a work force anymore, but a consumption force (Baudrillard, 1972). His work does not serve production, but the differentiating power of consumption. One works to acquire, and what one acquires is the work of others. Consumption is a social work, a duty to society.

THE FETISH

In his critique of the political economy of the sign (1972), Baudrillard argued that the commodity fetishism, an attribute of the exchange value, has been surpassed by the sign value. The rationality of the sign generates a value in itself: brands are bought and sold without conveying the materiality of the company, the people or the work symbolized by them. The rationality of the actual production and the actual work became completely empty.

Humans cannot become realized, much less be saved, by work as Hegel and Marx thought. This is because there is no longer a way to link the labor-value to the product. The very principle of the work has become buoyant, since there is no longer an equivalence between the salary and the activity. How, asked Baudrillard, can we justify the difference between the salary of a Boeing pilot who has responsibility for, say, 100 lives and a bus driver who, in his turn, is in charge of maybe 50 lives?

The reasoning is resumed in *The Mirror of Production* (1973), in which Baudrillard explains how, since production can no longer obey romantic rationality, it begins to fetishize (i.e. to attribute magical qualities to) work. Because of the hegemony of its code, which is much more than a commodity, the sign allows a control, a totalitarian exploitation of the productive effort. Telematic work is a simulated work, like the work of flight simulators. It can be controlled remotely, and its result is entirely symbolic (Baudrillard, 1997).

Baudrillard argues that the use value of an object – its utility regarding the satisfaction of certain needs – and its exchange value – its market value or price – have become irrelevant in comparison with its sign value. For example, a wedding ring has sign value which is incomparable with its exchange value, and has no use value (Lechte, 2002). Thus, Marx's theory that what distinguishes humans from animals is not thought, but the production of their own livelihood, became pointless. The dual character of work (abstract-social work / exchange value and concrete work / use value) implies a "secret vice", which is to think that industrial work is a political performance. In *Capital*, Marx says that work is the father and earth is the mother of production. Baudrillard mocks this "productive Eros." With the sign value, the idea that work is self-production or self-objectification of man, that work humanizes nature and naturalizes man, does not hold.

From this observation, Baudrillard concludes that human existence cannot be reduced to the productive effort. Ideology sought to universalize the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of work by articulating them. Quantitatively, work was transformed in abstract monetary value, but

qualitatively it cannot be measured, and so was fetishized. In fact, work is not universalized by its market value, but by its human value: working is a social necessity.

THE RATIONALITY OF THE SIMULACRUM

In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), Baudrillard continues the argument by saying that symbolic exchange has lost its organizing nature as the symbolic field subsists only as simulacrum. Simulacra have replaced ideology. The Marxist and Freudian codes conceal the loss of value. The code of the consumer society is salvation of the body as a sign of health, beauty and eroticism. It is contempt for the spirit, wisdom, knowledge or love. What is valuable is the sign-function, the body, which is not an article or a commodity, but a sales gimmick: a simulacrum.

The violence that requires the production effort no longer exists. Work, like leisure, has become a social demand. The production of concrete things requires less and less human energy. One lives the drama of work, with its rites, obligations, vacations and strikes. We work to generate simulacra. Work itself is a simulacrum in which the position, level, place and organization identify the sign. Neither the product nor the productive effort are valued, but only the simulacrum.

In *Seduction* (1981), Baudrillard argues that the meaninglessness of life, as an enchanted form, and the seduction of production, as a disenchanted form, govern the contemporary world. In the society of the simulacrum, of melancholy, evil appears in racism or xenophobia. The idea of the object determines an order governed by the seduction exercised by such idea. The product, whether tangible or intangible, is evident and visible. It is not seductive. A simulacrum is mysterious, hidden, implicit. Under the rule of the symbolic universe, we live on seduction and die of fascination (Bogard, 1990).

The sign determines the position of individuals and the social bonds and has its own rationality. Baudrillard criticizes the theories that seek to establish anything beyond the obvious, which he calls "hermeneutics of suspicion." Marxism, psychoanalysis and structuralism emphasize the search for hidden rationalities, while the real problem is the "seduction" of the superficial, of the here and now (Baudrillard, 1983).

The idea that primary needs govern society is a myth. No object exists isolated from other objects; every object is relational. The distinction is categorical. In the consumer society, objects become signs and economy defined by needs is left behind. A need is either psychological or cultural. Lifestyle and values, rather than economic needs, are the basis of social life. The distinction between

the true and false needs or artificial and real needs (Frankfurt School and Galbraith) makes no sense. It is moralism.

In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard says that the illusion of the system is to provide a perfect explanation detached from imperfect reality. He argues that society and economy work because people believe that there is an inherent rationality in economy and society. What he calls Disneyworld is the invisible machine that supports such belief. In Disneyworld, a worker is not a person, but a sign. Time is synchronized, space is obliterated and both are represented in the same context. We deal with a widespread metastasis, a clone of the world and of our mental universe (Baudrillard, 2000). Work and leisure-work invade life according to a hegemonic space-time code.

The hegemonic system transforms values by imposing the culture of the simulacrum, in which the meaning of life is unreal and simulated, reality is lost and meanings are abolished by the saturation of signs. In the hegemonic system, we all must, under penalty of social repression, hold a position, whether in the office or on the beach, whether in the factory or watching TV. The system trained us to believe that work, technology, information culture and leisure are desirable. Our reality is codified and made of “passwords” (Baudrillard, 2000). We were “retribalized” (Baudrillard, 1970) according to what we consume. A worker is a copy of other workers and a copy of himself in time. We are all replicants.

THE LOGIC OF CODES

Symbolic exchange define areas of rationality. There is an economic component in the rationality of our time, but there are other rationalities, such as the rationality of status, sexual rationality, the rationality of social bonds and the rationality of information. In our world, there are four different logic:

1. the logic of practical operations, which corresponds to the use value – the logic of utility, in which the object is an instrument;
2. the logic of equivalence, which corresponds to the exchange value – the logic of the market, in which the object is a commodity;
3. the logic of ambivalence, which corresponds to the symbolic exchange – the logic of the gift, in which the object is a symbol with an evocative, magical or cultural value;
4. the logic of difference, which corresponds to the sign value or code – the logic of status, in which the object is a sign or signal representing something else.

The use value and the work force are abstractions that have nothing to do with the goods produced, but with the energy expended by the worker. The economy escapes the use value and also the symbolic value. The concepts used by the liberals, Marxists, post-Marxists and Freudians no longer apply. The Freudian interpretation of the sign and the interpretation derived from structuralism (Saussure, Mauss, Lévi-Strauss) are wrong. The symbolic field is marked by ambivalence, reciprocity and transgression. We went beyond that and are now living in the age of codes.

We are servants of codes (binary code, DNA, digital code). The age of codes overcame the age of signs. We do not produce anymore, but *re-produce*. We code to copy. The simulation and the model are the keys to our economy. We overcame forgery, which, during the Renaissance, established a distinction between the natural and the artificial. We overcame production, which, during the industrial era, established the difference between the product and the work process. The digital era is governed by simulation: when dominated by the code, the difference between production and reproduction is annulled.

Baudrillard's criticism of conventional approaches to work is the same as Derrida's critique of logocentrism and Foucault's criticism of rationalism: the existing epistemologies are insufficient to analyze the framework of occupations related to services, information and the dynamics of contemporary life in general. Our society, like primitive and archaic societies, is not built on the basis of productive work. Material wealth resulting from the labor-investment binomial was subsumed by symbolic wealth derived from the interchange between destruction, destitution, gift and transgression.

The rationality of codes implies that quality is not above quantity. Quality is concrete and natural, while quantity is abstract and artificial and refers to the salary paid. The structural system generated by the relationship between quantity and quality is what generates the idea of the need of productive work. The autonomization of work as a category is a fetish that cannot subsist.

In codified society there is not even the freedom of spare time. How you spend your spare time is an indication of our status or position in society. Time, like work, is a functional mechanism rather than a pace (succession of natural moments in a cycle). Time is a function of the mode of production and is subject to the same statute of production and consumption. Spare time is defined by the absence of working time rather than by leisure.

Essential occupations, such as domestic chores, research and cultural creation, are not measured. They are not part of indices and of economic rationality. For the same measurability reason, the production of useless things, such as fashion, and harmful things, such as tobacco, are measured

and valued. The virtual perspective is a vestige of reality, like the body, sex and work (Baudrillard, 1999).

HYPERREAL WORK

The “system of needs” which governs consumption bears no relationship with the use value or with the desire imposed. Those are eighteenth-century categories. The universalizing of work is a result of the “structural articulation” between two terms: quality and quantity. Work was not universalized for its market value, but for the value that it has for humans (Lane, 2002).

The employee is a consumer. Marx said that consumption is necessary for the reproduction of the work force, since the employee buys what is necessary for his subsistence. Baudrillard says that the employee buys without connection with needs. He consumes things that he does not need – time on the internet without a purpose, for example – and that consumption drives the economy like dot-com companies drive the stock exchange. The system has changed. The worker has detached from the product. He produces mechanically, but the product has been subsumed by the production process, and this process is governed by consumption.

There is no such thing as the freedom of non-productive time, just as there is no freedom to produce (or not produce) or freedom to consume (or not consume). Non-productive time has a status value: it is a commodity and a sign. Work became an object of consumption to the extent that it is preferable to idleness. Love for work is confused with workaholic life, hyperactivity is confused with industriousness, hard work is confused with creativity, the pathological is confused with the healthy. Work became dematerialized: private and organizational space have mixed with the public space (Rogue, 2005).

We escaped the Fordist world to the world of spatial fragmentation of production, embodied in internalization and displacement. High-tech industry replaced the factories of the twentieth century. We are in the era of hyperreality and hyperreal companies, such as internet companies, which operate beyond the materiality of the product. Work ceased to be an activity and became an operation (Baudrillard, 1990).

In this world, the worker lives between autonomy and submission. He is autonomous to find new jobs, to empower himself and to move. But he is compelled to the passivity of induced consumption. He lives, produces and consumes artificiality. The rational activity of the worker is to operate in the hyperreality of the system and to enter the realm of floating significance, floating

meanings and meaninglessness. It is to play with ambivalence, since the game has no stable rules (Coulter, 2007), and to adopt risk strategies, abandoning the radical objective position of the subject (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 150).

Baudrillard wrote that indifference is the atonal form of challenge in our time (1993). The greatest barrier to be overcome by the worker is the comfort that such indifference provides.

REFERENCES

BAUDRILLARD, J. In: GANE, M. (Ed.) *Baudrillard live: selected interviews*. London: Routledge, 1993.

BAUDRILLARD, J. *Le système des objets*. Paris: Gallimard, 1968.

BAUDRILLARD, J. *El otro por sí mismo*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 1997.

BAUDRILLARD, J. *D'un fragment l'autre, entretiens avec François L'Yvonnet*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2001.

BAUDRILLARD, J. *De la séduction*. Paris: Galilée, 1979.

BAUDRILLARD, J. *L'échange impossible*, Paris: Galilée, 1999.

BAUDRILLARD, J. *L'échange symbolique et la mort*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.

BAUDRILLARD, J. *La société de consommation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.

BAUDRILLARD, J. *La transparence du mal*. Paris: Galilée, 1990.

BAUDRILLARD, J. *Le miroir de la production*. Paris: Casterman, 1973.

BAUDRILLARD, J. *Les objets singuliers, avec Jean Nouvel*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2000.

- BAUDRILLARD, J. *Les stratégies fatales*. Paris: Grasset, 1983.
- BAUDRILLARD, J. *Mots de passe*. Paris: Pauvert, 2000.
- BAUDRILLARD, J. *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972.
- BAUDRILLARD, J. *Simulacres et simulations*. Paris: Galilée, 1981.
- BOGARD, W. Closing down the social: Baudrillard's challenge to contemporary sociology. *Sociological Theory*, v. 8, n. 1, p. 1-15, Spring 1990.
- COULTER, G. Jean Baudrillard and the definitive ambivalence of gaming. *Games and Culture*, v. 2, p. 358, 2007.
- JUNG, J. (Ed.) *Le travail*. Paris: Flammarion, 2000.
- KING, A. A critique of Baudrillard's hyperreality: towards a sociology of postmodernism. *Philosophy Social Criticism*, v. 24, p. 47, 1998.
- LANE, R. J. *Jean Baudrillard*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- LECHTE, J. *50 pensadores contemporâneos essenciais: do estruturalismo à pós-modernidade*. Rio de Janeiro: Difel, 2002.
- ROGUE, C. *Le travail*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2005.