Baudrillard Now
Baudrillard Now

Current Perspectives in Baudrillard Studies

EDITED BY
RYAN BISHOP

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The perfect symbol of the end of the century is (or was rather) the numerical clock at the Beaubourg (Centre Georges Pompidou) in Paris. There, the race against time was measured in millions of seconds. The Beaubourg clock illustrates the reversal of time characteristic of our contemporary modernity. Time is no longer counted from its point of origin, as a progressive succession. It is rather subtracted from the end (5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0). It is like a bomb with delayed effect. The end of time is no longer the symbolic completion of history, but the mark of a possible fatigue, of a regressive countdown. We are no longer living according to a projected vision of progress or production. The final illusion of history has disappeared since history is now encapsulated in a numerical countdown (just as the final illusion of humankind disappears when man is encapsulated in genetic computations). Counting the seconds from now to the end means that the end is near, that one has already gone beyond the end.

Jean Baudrillard (1998)

The problem is, rather, that of a precession of thought over the event – and yet, simultaneously, of the precession of the event over thought. It’s this double helix that’s mysterious. In the case of the World Trade Center, for example, everything I’ve been writing for twenty years
was, ultimately, something like a prefigured shock wave of the event, as though it had always been there, identified in a kind of retrospective anticipation. Thought’s neither a prophecy nor a prediction. It’s a prefiguration. It’s already there like the event in a sense, and it finds its fulfilment in something that wholly escapes it. The event impacts on thought even before it has occurred. And when it finally happens, it’s both the realization of thought and its end.

Jean Baudrillard and Enrique Valiente Noailles (2007: 4)

To call a book Baudrillard Now risks hubris or tautology – perhaps both. For Baudrillard has always been writing “the now” and is never more current than he is right now. But to say that Baudrillard has been, always was and always is, writing about the current moment is more than slightly glib and glosses over the many diverse and complex ways the present appears and disappears from view in his work in the guise of origins, history, time in general, and most specifically “the end”: our being consumed by as well as our consumption of the end, of endings, and the drive for completion. The *topos* called “the end” – its illusion, impossibility, necessity, desirability, and horror – winds its way through almost every single piece in this volume just as it finds many manifestations in Baudrillard’s work. So it is wise to begin with the end. Applying Baudrillard’s continued interest in reversibility, we can paraphrase Groucho Marx as Captain Spaulding and ventriloquize for Baudrillard: “I just left to say I must be staying.”

Baudrillard is, amongst other things, a philosopher of ends and a theorist of eschatologies, which imply in themselves origins and teleologies, all of which Baudrillard would eschew while nonetheless studying them rigorously. His is an apocalyptic vision of sorts but one without revelation, as Jacques Derrida noted in another related context. The end of humanity Baudrillard spies on the horizon is built into the historical trends he analyzes, especially those that constitute his late concept “integral reality.” Teleologies are always also eschatologies, trajectories with ready-made terminals. The drive for completion, to end everything, marks our twenty-first century as much as it did the latter half of the twentieth, the twilight of which we occupy in shadowy uncertainty. The idea of ends, especially the end of history, is an illusion, a creation of
metaphysical thought, but one that lingers and refuses to go away. Its staying power thus explains our fixation on origins, which in turn explain the teleologies that render legible the rational, purposeful design of the straight path from origins to ends.

Baudrillard’s death in 2007, which seems more present and current now than it did at the time, is an event present in or the subtext of many of the chapters in this collection. Perhaps this explains one of the reasons that Baudrillard as a philosopher of ends remains so purposefully at play now in this collection. From the critical re-examinations of Baudrillard’s oeuvre offered by Douglas Kellner and Ryan Bishop and John Phillips through the pieces by John Beck and Kellner, and concluding appropriately with Phillips on humanity’s end, the book gathers some of the many threads of thought on ends and endings found in Baudrillard’s writings to create an arbitrarily arranged engagement with the illusions and seductions operating in eschatologies across various topics and texts.

Phillips starts his chapter with a quotation from Baudrillard’s last full work to appear in English, The Intelligence of Evil, discussing the import of the impossibility and necessity of ending for “the human” and humanity: “The human race owes its becoming (and perhaps even its survival) entirely to the fact that it had no end in itself, and certainly not that of becoming what it is (of fulfilling itself, identifying with itself)” (Baudrillard, 2005: 212). Using this statement, especially the provocative dimensions of the phrase “no end in itself,” Phillips addresses Baudrillard’s recasting of Hegel’s concepts of Ansich (itself a reworking of the Greek terms potência and dínamis) as “the end in itself” and Fürsich (which revises the Greek actus and enérgēia) as “the not yet” in relation to Hegelian constructions of teleology and history. Phillips argues that

Baudrillard understands history, as if in a technical revision of Hegel’s teleology, as the intensification over hundreds of years of the domination in Western societies of spurious and superficial abstractions that stand in for reality. He describes this intensification in terms of “successive mutations of the law of value.” Here we may recognize a kind of abstraction that can acknowledge its own force of simulation. Baudrillard’s brand of simulation is produced, with meticulous
attention to the details of historical becoming, in order to combat an overwhelming trend, which seems mobilized to reduce the forces of simulation or to deny them even as it manifests those forces to the greatest imaginable extent.

The connections between various kinds of end or ending and simulation reside in the many technologies of information, calculation and homogenization that are all that we have “after the end,” an impossible ending that we have already moved through. Yet for all of Baudrillard’s seemingly bleak perspectives on the fate of the human in the face of these forces that we have generated and applied to ourselves and that allow us to move between the false origin of fossils and the false end of cloning, we have reason to find some comfort in the irresolvable clash of the horror of completion and our utter failure to complete. This state of affairs is neatly summed up by Phillips when he asserts that

When reading Baudrillard, it is not possible to avoid the sense that we members of the twenty-first century are unlucky to live in a world dominated by the drive for completion, and which attacks us on multiple levels. Nonetheless Baudrillard can best be characterized, alongside his eternal vigilance against completion, by his affirmation of the essential indeterminacy of a future whose becoming belongs to an irreducible “in itself,” a potential that knows no end. In a world whose business it is to anticipate the future we should expect monsters; but to affirm the chance of an indeterminate future is to welcome that possibility.

If Phillips discusses Baudrillard’s thoughts about the metaphysical necessity of ends for humanity, then Beck uses the Charlton Heston character, Taylor, from Planet of the Apes to remind us that the last man in America is also the last man for humanity. Taylor’s end of humanity is the embodiment of all ends that are the American project. Taylor is the unwitting astronaut of Reagan’s America just as Baudrillard himself is the cognizant astronaut of Reagan’s America as written up in Baudrillard’s own America. The operating assumptions of Reaganesque triumphalism that Baudrillard finds himself positioned within during his US sojourn articu-
late a perfection that allows no resistance and that contains nothing outside itself: a vision of the US as the perfect realization of all systems, calculations and material acquisition. Ever the protean rhetorician, Baudrillard performs his critique by occupying Taylor’s discourse as well as Reagan’s. Similarly he takes up that of various critics and celebrants of the US within the stock division of historical Old World–New World typologies. Countering critics who charged Baudrillard with an unthinking lazy repetition of European criticisms of and clichés about US culture, Beck explains that the occupation of these rhetorical domains consciously renders Baudrillard

the last man, self-positioned as outside the society he has “discovered.” What has come true for Taylor is that the monstrous other world he believes he has been arbitrarily flung into is in fact the product of his own world and his values: he is not lost but has been at home all along. “It is the American way of life,” Baudrillard argues, a way of life Europeans think is “naive or culturally worthless,” that will in fact offer a “graphic representation of the end of our values” (Baudrillard 1988: 98). The horror in *America* is that Baudrillard, like Taylor in *Planet of the Apes*, discovers that he speaks the same language as the awful future society he has encountered.

The end of our values, then, is found in and made possible through the end of the possibility of another language with which to speak of cultural values, existential realization or, even, ends. Beck extends this point by arguing that *America* “speaks in a language – the American language of incarnational freedom – that it does not fully understand, like a phonetic language. Or, perhaps more accurately, it speaks a language that has been learned through reading and watching rather than through conversation.” Linking Baudrillard’s work on simulation to that of the US-incarnated rhetoric, Beck claims that neither one has an outside, and both bespeak their all-smothering inclusiveness. The end of alternative thought and language is found here.

In Beck, we find Baudrillard as Taylor – the last man, or in other words “the American” – engaging the end of language. In Phillips we get the end of humanity in the endless calculation
of futural possibility that destroys the end as end. With Kellner’s brief meditation on the very late essay by Baudrillard entitled “On Disappearance,” we have the more dire possibility: complete human disappearance. Kellner quotes the essay’s opening “dramatic invocation: ‘Let us speak then of the world from which human beings have disappeared.’” Reworking the terrain of the dialectic between appearance and disappearance important to Baudrillard’s thought, Kellner suggests the article also returns to a number of Baudrillard’s motifs: “the disappearance of the real, the subject, and the human being itself in a world of simulation, hyperreality, virtual reality, networks, and the system of what Baudrillard calls ‘integral reality.’” The disappearance of the real, though not necessarily its end, initiates the fatal process of the disappearance of humans from the world. Once again, language plays a central role in these disappearances. Although the intensification of technologies of disappearance is an idea he shares with Paul Virilio, the relationship of language to disappearance is a point that Baudrillard takes from Hegel. “On Disappearance” picks up a theme also found in Exiles from Dialogue as well as other later pieces by Baudrillard: that once something is named or represented as a concept then we have begun to hasten its doom. The mere act of language use initiates the disappearance of that which it brings into being through the sleight of hand that is representation.

To press this point a bit more, advertising would exacerbate further the disappearance begun by language and naming several fold. Thus if any further proof were required for the disappearance and end of humanity, one would only need look at the recent (2008) campaign designed for Dow Chemical company that reads: “Humanity is the world’s most precious natural resource.”1 The ad includes a mock periodic table symbol “Hu” and an attendant periodical number. Placed under the sign of chemistry and the taxonomic neatness of the periodic table (all within an ad), humanity disappears into resource: a thought that demands a nod toward Martin Heidegger. The larger campaign ad, in a conceit reminiscent of John Donne, concentrates on “the human element.” The lines and graphics suggest that more than just the human body exists as a source for mining, extrapolation, and exploitation: humanity in and of itself does. In an age fixated on counting down time, racing
toward ecological and environmental exhaustion, and waging wars for precious natural resources (i.e. finding our ends in fossils), then the evocation of humanity as yet another dwindling resource in need of preserving, maximizing, and husbanding stamps the human and humanity as near-extinct entities whose bones might foreshadow another revival of energetic activity just as the demise of the dinosaurs did for us. The shadow of the Bhopal disaster falls across the ad in many ways, not the least of which being that the child featured as the hope of humanity’s future clearly comes from “the developing world” as his attire indicates. The corporation mines the grisly petrochemical disaster for indications of hope just as Western culture seeks solace in the flashes of the human spirit displayed in distant catastrophe. But just as human rights signal the end of the human in the global order of Integral Reality, so the corporation’s advertising copy and graphics signal the increasing abstraction of objects upon which the economic orders of Integral Reality operate, thus hastening our collective end. In case we feel a turn to metaphysics might salvage us, the Dow ad has anticipated that move too, and it also includes the line “the future is now.” The present too disappears into a projected and predicted future just as the future and the past – not to mention space – disappear in the grips of “real time” and the technologies that render it ever-present.

Several chapters contained in this collection provide doublings and extensions of Baudrillard’s thought by bringing aspects of his work explicitly into dialogue with that of another thinker (as Phillips does with Hegel) especially as they pertain to the status of objects and their relation to simulation and the hyperreal. In each instance, the chapters by John Armitage, Mark Poster, and Bishop and Phillips take leads from Baudrillard’s writing, extend them in various directions, address the imperatives contained in his increasingly productive analyses and return to the concepts with variations, modifications, and contradictions.

Armitage’s “Pursuit in Paris” uses the positive phenomenology of Alphonso Lingis to place Baudrillard’s “revenge of the object” in creative tension over the shifting status of subject–object relations within cultural theory. Taking Baudrillard’s conceit of reversibility as it pertains to standard Western notions of subject–object relations
and his provocative assertions about the object playing with (and occasionally exacting revenge on) the subject, Armitage uses Lingis’s imperative of the object that calls us forth, outside of ourselves, to engage with a world that speaks to us directly through the senses. Thus the senses are fully and (non-)prosthetically engaged in Armitage’s photo chapter. They lead him and his partner in a guided pursuit of Baudrillard’s grave. Because the chapter is shot through with Baudrillard and Lingis, this pursuit is by no means grim, but rather thoughtfully and gratefully embodied and sensuous in ways both thinkers guide us toward. But there is clearly no resolution possible between Lingis and Baudrillard insofar as the object goes. For Lingis, the object is immediately, directly, and unavoidably accessible in a neo-Romantic, phenomenological manner while such unmediated access for Baudrillard is absurd. In both instances, the object takes on an imperative but does so for very different reasons and ends. It is this tension and the demands of it on cultural and visual theory that Armitage undertakes in order to consider how Baudrillard’s work might, in Armitage’s words, be “conserved, sheltered, restored, and, crucially, developed.” (Once again, the ending of Baudrillard proves impossible.)

This oblique homage to Baudrillard’s “Pursuit in Venice” and his writings on Sophie Calle’s La Suite vénitienne invites consideration of the medium of photography: part of Baudrillard’s own artistic ground. The photographic images that punctuate Armitage’s chapter also punctuate the ruminations on the object conducted by Lingis and Baudrillard, directing us to the deeply paradoxical nature of the photographic image as the site where the object becomes both most apparent and most attenuated, both most easily grasped and most elusive. Photography reveals, as Baudrillard points out, how “technical equipment and the world enter into collusion; ‘objective’ technology and the potency of the object converge” (Baudrillard, 2001: 139). Baudrillard actually posits “a rough and ready phenomenology” rather close to that enacted by Armitage, one that could bring Lingis and Baudrillard together if only for a brief uncomfortable moment. This phenomenology is found in the subversive function of the photographic image when it “becomes literal” thus creating “a phenomenology of absence which is usually impossible, because the object is