



THE ANTIDOTE TO THE GLOBAL LIES IN THE SINGULAR: AN INTERVIEW WITH JEAN BAUDRILLARD

JEAN-FRANÇOIS PAILLARD

Jean-François Paillard: How does one become a major French intellectual?

Jean Baudrillard: My career's been an atypical one. With grandparents who were peasant farmers in the Ardennes and parents who had moved to the town and become white-collar workers, I'm a member of that generation in which the sons of the middle classes were able to get into higher education without much difficulty. But I gave up on the idea of a prestigious teaching career early on. I was a secondary school teacher for a long time, but all I ever had to my name was the CAPES.¹ I didn't go to the École normale supérieure, which was the obligatory route into university teaching at the time. I didn't do a state doctorate either and I never reached the rank of university professor, despite twenty years spent teaching sociology at the University of Nanterre on the invitation of Henri Lefebvre. Moreover, my first theoretical work came late in life: I was already thirty-nine when *The System of Objects*

was published in 1968. For a long time I was, admittedly, concerned more with political action than writing...

J-F.P.: That first work made something of a radical critique of the consumer society...

J.B.: More an analysis of the consumer object than a critique of the system overall. That would come a few years later with *The Consumer Society*, published in 1970.² The initial idea was to show how objects were both part of a social practice and a mythology, the act of purchase being something both deeply material and highly symbolic. In fact, there was a kind of misunderstanding from the beginning. My book dealt almost exclusively with the manufactured object. It explored its simultaneously physical and metaphysical dimensions. Coming at these two facets of the object was a way of beginning a dialogue with Marxism and psychoanalysis, which between them occupied most of the intellectual horizon at the time. Yet what people immediately took from this analysis was the famous critique of the consumer society...

J-F.P.: And not without reason. As early as *The System of Objects*,³ you write: “In the current order, objects are not intended to be possessed but simply to be bought.” You try to lay down “the rights and duties of the consumer.” You speak of the “Father Christmas logic” of advertising...

J.B.: For thirty years now, as soon as a country has achieved a level of mass consumption, it has seized on *The System of Objects* and *The Consumer Society* and translated them into its own language. So these two works have never been out of print. For me, all the same, the books are part of a previous life and my work has gone in another direction ... The concept of “consumer society,” like that of the “society of the spectacle” which Guy Debord coined in 1967, has passed entirely into people’s lives. They’ve been popularized to such a degree that they’re really hackneyed now. You even find them in political discourse, which shows how far things have gone ...

J-F.P.: You went on then to attack the sacrosanct “art object,” which you saw simply as a commodity like any other ...

J.B.: In the mid 1970s, the state created the Beaubourg Gallery (Centre Pompidou) and it became the mecca of “culture for all.” This was the “Beaubourg Effect.”⁴ At the same time we saw an unprecedented, almost industrial development of artistic works produced specifically for galleries, which came in the end to take themselves as their own subject. With one accord, artists set about borrowing the most banal of objects from reality and lumping them together – sometimes under cover of “performances” – in installations that were of the order of scrap heaps, mere accumulations ... I took the view that this approach

was purely illustrative, that it ended in connivance – and, ultimately, collusion – with *things as they are*, and nothing more. Artists had, so to speak, become part of the wider game, had fallen into line. Nothing was being radically questioned any more – nothing whatever; no specifically artistic scene was being invented. All that was left was space-filling. An enormous accumulation of – banalized, commodified – “art objects.” Like an enormous rekindling of Duchamp’s stroke of genius that had raised the urinal to the status of work of art. Everything had become art and so nothing was art any more ... At the same time, art, which was no longer reserved for the elite, became both an affair of state and an object of political strategy. That too was the “Beaubourg effect”! It was an affair of state when – through sacralizing the art object and the gallery where you commune with it – the aim was to cultivate “the masses,” that new “silent majority,” a vague, elusive entity that was beginning to appear with the first opinion polls and the books that were being written about it, such as Marshall McLuhan’s. And it was an object of political strategy when it came to putting the masses to sleep, with the alibi of culture playing the role of safety valve and, ultimately, instrument of alienation.

J-F.P.: Was that strategy successful in the end?

J.B.: I don’t think so. The fact that the masses were thwarting that strategy on the part of power – through the media, among other ways – had already struck me at the time. The masses are both alienated by political and media power and, at the same time, impose such a leveling-down of political and cultural discourse that they neutralize its impact, so to speak: everything foisted on them falls, as it were, into a great black hole, the hole of the indeterminate, the indecipherable. With the emergence of the masses, there’s no comeback of political discourse; there isn’t even any political representation any longer: there’s nothing at all. As though the masses had become an object and were now taking their revenge on the world of objects.

J-F.P.: Refusing, that being the case, to be manipulated ...

J.B.: Manipulation, cooptation – I’m wary of these terms that presuppose an intention or some great organizing instance, terms that assume a center where there isn’t one. We’d like to see the system we live in, this famous capitalist system, governed by some kind of ruler. In fact, it’s the internal logic of the Western system, both respected by – and imposing itself on – everyone, that dominates the world. Take the art market, for example. It’s the essentially economic logic of that market, further encouraged by its mediatization, that explains the aesthetic banality of contemporary art objects. Only the insane idea that artists escape this implacable process remains, as though they enjoyed some special privilege. A contradiction that is a product of the simulacrum in these times of globalization.

J-F.P.: A globalization which could be said, in your view, to be the highest stage of the consumer society?

J.B.: It's undeniable that the entire planet has come to be organized in value terms today – a phenomenon made possible by the advent of mass consumption, the media's hold on society, and the generalized use of digital technologies. No sphere of human activity, private or collective, is spared. We're dealing with a total system, a kind of integral reality that foists itself on us as a universal order ... Between the themes of the global and the universal, there is, in fact, a false affinity. Universality is things like human rights and democracy, whereas globalization refers to another register – technologies, the market, information. It seems implacable, irreversible. And destructive: it kills off all other cultures by forcibly assimilating them. And, indeed, the dilution of the universal into the global can be seen as something alarming today – for example, in the exploitation of human rights as an element of political marketing. Consequently, the important question seems to be to identify what is irreducible to globalization, what doesn't play along with this new undeclared world war ...

J-F.P.: You speak, in this connection, of a Fourth World War ...

J.B.: Quite. The first two put an end to colonialist Europe and to Nazism. The Third, which we euphemistically call the Cold War, though it was a very real one, sealed the fate of Communism. Note that on each occasion we've moved towards a more all-encompassing world order, more towards one world. And this process has now virtually reached its end. Hence the widespread sense that we're dealing with an enormous unified system today, an integral reality, in which the enemy is everywhere and nowhere. This is what I have in mind when I speak of a Fourth World War: the war globalization wages on itself. In a globalized system, face-to-face conflict is no longer possible; there's no declared enemy any more, no territory to conquer. The system's gone too far. To the point where it eventually breaks down and begins to consume itself by secreting a form of inner corruption. Not corruption in the moral sense, but something like a dismantling of the whole, terrorism being the violent metaphor for this tension that is irreducible to the system. As though it played the role of a virus which, in the end, might be said to affect everyone's imagination, adding a supplementary element of tension to the system, though this time a symbolic and virtual one.

J-F.P.: Your interpretation of terrorism, which you refuse to see as an immoral act, is rather iconoclastic.

J.B.: Either we analyze terrorism as a sort of power of evil originating elsewhere – in the depths of Islam, for example – and explanation gives way to value judgment, or we look beyond good and evil. Terrorism then appears as an answering of evil with evil, something like the shadow

cast by the system of domination – a hegemonic system which foists itself on everyone in the name of a democratic or universalist discourse entirely at odds with its own actions. Has it not been in the name of a war against terror – what English-speakers call “deterrence” – that the Western powers have imposed a kind of security terror on themselves? That’s why I say that terrorism, as a power that has seeped into the system, is perhaps winning the battle.

J-F.P.: And the United States is losing?

J.B.: There is one world power which, by merrily riding roughshod over the universal values in whose name it speaks, has lost all legitimacy. Since it no longer has any precise enemies, it’s creating some for itself, of varying degrees of virtuality: Afghanistan, Iraq, and, of course, terrorism – a vague, elusive, but convenient concept, since it can be seen as the ultimate power of evil. The problem is that, nowadays, the evil is largely virtual. A good example of this is Iraq, where the weapons of mass destruction have, after all, never been found. The worst thing is that, by claiming to fight this evil, centers of infection get created all over the place: Afghanistan, Iraq, Indonesia, Turkey, etc. As though the system were always running further into trouble by seeking to escape it.

J-F.P.: In that respect, do you think September 11 was predictable?

J.B.: No, it is by definition an unpredictable event. An incident that springs up in a system with too much forward planning – a system that’s too programmatic – is necessarily unpredictable. But its occurrence is possible. In a context of globalization, political history is sinking into a slough of tedium. Representation doesn’t work any more, the gaps between rich and poor yawn ever wider. And then, from time to time, there’s an explosion, a dramatic event, an “accident” as my friend Paul Virilio would say. He’s actually talking about an accident that could be apocalyptic ...

J-F.P.: Do you believe that?

J.B.: That’s not the way I am. I don’t think the world will come to an end that way, though, in reality, we simply have no idea. But I don’t think we’re moving into a classical cycle of – social, cultural, or economic – crises, crisis being, after all, part of progress. I believe more in a process of a catastrophic type where, as I said before, the system, in trying to solve its problems, rushes further and further into the mire. And does so in all fields ... You can see this, for example, in the area of information. We’re aware there’s a problem here. Images and messages have proliferated to such an extent, become so undifferentiated and impossible to sort out, that they’ve ended up preventing any form of exchange. Yet the proposed solutions to this problem merely generate even more images and messages. We are, then, in the presence of

a catastrophic process... Still, there's something entertaining in the spectacle of the present world racing out of control and ultimately unhinging *itself*, incapable as it is of escaping its own logic, as though it were caught in its own trap.

J-F.P.: What about the individual? Do you think individuals can exercise agency in this “unhinged” world?

J.B.: I think a form of vitality remains in every human being, something irreducible that resists, a singularity of a metaphysical order that goes even beyond political commitment – not that that commitment has been entirely eliminated. So we must look to the singular for the antidote to the global. I have to tell you, in fact, that if I weren't convinced that there's something in the human being that fights and resists, I'd quite simply have given up writing. Since, in that case, writing would be just tilting at windmills. I'm firmly of the belief that this particular, irreducible element can't be universalized or globalized, that it can't be part of some standard form of exchange. Will human beings do something positive with it one day? We can't say. The issue's by no means decided. And that, in fact, is where I find scope for optimism...

Translated by Chris Turner

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NOTES

1. The CAPES – at the time, the acronym stood for *Certificat d'aptitude au professorat de l'enseignement secondaire* – is the major professional qualification for teaching in secondary schools and at the lower levels of the university system. Students at the *École normale supérieure* wishing to teach in the higher reaches of the university system would normally take the competitive examination known as *l'Agrégation* [Trans.].
2. Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, translated by Chris Turner (London, Thousand Oaks, Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998) [Trans.].
3. Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, translated by James Benedict (London: Verso, 1998) [Trans.].
4. Baudrillard published the short text *L'effet Beaubourg: Implosion et dissuasion* (Paris: Galilée) in September 1983 [Trans.].