

5 Postmodernism

Jean Baudrillard

Baudrillard refused to adopt the stiff academic tone used by many of his predecessors and contemporaries in his writing, producing instead an almost prophetic and strident set of texts that feel out of place within wider academia. Yet, the impact of Baudrillard's writing has been enormous, introducing a whole new glossary of media terminology – hyperreality, media implosion and simulacra – to suggest that contemporary mass media messages are inescapable and all-consuming yet, conversely, empty of meaning. As the academic William Merrin tells us, Baudrillard's books are, 'standard reference points for any understanding of our cultural processes' (Merrin, 2005, 5).

Key concept: the real and the hyperreal

Baudrillard's key argument stems from his observation that society has experienced three distinct stages of cultural evolution that he labels 'the precession of simulacra' (see Box 5.1). In many ways, Baudrillard's precession relates the story of twentieth-century secularisation and the replacement of religion as society's primary meaning maker by the mass media. The three phases of Baudrillard's precession can loosely be described as follows:

- **Phase 1 – Early modernity.** This covers the period from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution. In this stage, cultural products (literature, music and art) map closely to what Baudrillard calls 'a profound reality' (Baudrillard, 2018, 6). Culture, in this sense, creates an authentic experience when consumed. Mass culture, moreover, is dominated by the lone voice of religion and connects the masses to a singular ideology – to one version of the

world. Culture, too, Baudrillard tells us, is 'sacramental' in that it communicates profound spiritual experiences. As a result, early modernity produces authenticity and a collectively agreed set of truths about the world in which we live.

- **Phase 2 – Modernity.** The second phase, modernity, covers the period from the Industrial Revolution to the Second World War. In this stage, religion and religious certainties begin to fragment, eventually giving way to early mass media forms like cinema, radio and photography. During modernity, Baudrillard argues, the authenticity and collective truths of early modernity begin to 'dis-simulate' (Baudrillard, 2018, 6), breaking down into competing versions of reality.
- **Phase 3 – Postmodernity.** The final phase, the phase in which we now live, is labelled 'postmodernity'. In postmodernity, Baudrillard argues, mass media forms dominate culture, replacing the single voice of religion with the multi-channel, multi-media whirlwind of contemporary mass media. This, Baudrillard tells us is the age of 'hyperreality' in which cultural products no longer reference the deeper unified significations that religion once provided. In the postmodern era, culture is fragmented, its meanings and instructions are temporary, its messages commercialised and inauthentic.

Box 5.1 Know it: why does Baudrillard describe culture as a 'simulacra'?

Baudrillard uses the word 'simulacra' to suggest that culture (mass media, religion, art, etc.) produce versions of reality to help explain our place and function in the universe. Christian religion, for instance, constructs a version of reality in which, crudely speaking, God is said to have created the universe in seven days. Of course, God did not create the world in seven days. This assertion is an early religious story that attempted to explain the complexities of the universe before science could give us a more accurate picture. Culture, of course, authors numerous other stories that attempt to explain the world we live in. Importantly, Baudrillard argues, these cultural products, or versions of reality, are in fact 'simulations'. The 'precession of the simulacra' refers to the way in which those 'simulations' have changed since the Renaissance.

The ecstasy of communication

Significantly for Baudrillard, the technologies of the mass media have helped construct what he calls an ‘ecstasy of communication’ (Baudrillard, 1987, 11), arguing that the process of meaning making has exponentially expanded in the postmodern era, permeating modern life in ways that lie far beyond the cultural capacities of previous historical periods. Baudrillard identifies the following effects of postmodernity:

- **The media is everywhere.** In today’s hyperreal world, every bus hoarding, street corner and shop window is an advertising opportunity – indeed, our public spaces are so saturated with media that it is almost impossible to avoid the tidal wave of cultural messages beamed at us.
- **Our private spaces have been invaded.** Baudrillard tells us, too, that today’s hyperreal media even penetrates the once safe havens of our family homes. There is no escape, Baudrillard says, from the incessant chatter of hyperreality: ‘One’s private living space,’ Baudrillard writes, ‘is conceived of as a receiving and operating area, as a monitoring screen endowed with telematic power’ (Baudrillard, 1987, 17).
- **Authenticity is impossible to find or keep.** Because the hyperreal world of modern media is so all-encompassing and so incessant, Baudrillard tells us, the deluge of messages offered have limited significance. Cultural products in postmodernity construct throw-away messages, forgotten almost as instantly as they are consumed.
- **Repetition and duplication effects.** The postmodern media, Baudrillard further argues, repeats and repurposes content in a never-ending chain of replication. Commercially successful products are repurposed, remade, serialised or copied to attract and maintain audiences, while genre-oriented storytelling replicates narrative formulas in endless echoes of products that are themselves copies of something that was made a long time ago. In this sense, Baudrillard tells us, we know the end of any news event before it has happened. We know how our box-sets will resolve or how our gaming cut scenes will play out, because ‘everything is already dead and resurrected in advance’ (Baudrillard, 2018, 6).

Box 5.2 Think about it: what effect does postmodern hyperreality have on audiences?

- To what extent is it true that we live in world in which it is impossible to escape the reach of media? Is it possible to completely escape the reach of the media?
- In what ways have smartphone ownership and the digital revolution expanded the reach of hyperreality?
- How many media products have you seen today? How many advertisements have you seen? How much time have you spent on social media?
- How many media messages have a deeper meaning or connect us to authentic or satisfying experiences?
- Is it true that the contemporary media duplicates and replicates the same stories over and over? Can you provide any examples of this?
- Has media proliferation meant that we have lost touch with the natural world?

Meaning implosion

The proliferation of media comes at a further cost in that the variety of arguments and opinions presented via television, news and online media makes it difficult for audiences to reach an objective conclusion about the real world. News outlets, for instance, produce a version of the world that we implicitly understand to be biased towards one political viewpoint, and in today’s media landscape it does not take too long to locate an opposing source or contradictory analysis.

Indeed, products internally neutralise content through the use of opposing opinion editorials or balanced reportage. The resulting effect is to present a world in which simultaneous truths exist – a presentation, moreover, that lacks both objectivity or certainty and that leaves media audiences to effect what Baudrillard calls hyperreal ‘inertia’ (Baudrillard, 2018, 68), a kind of mesmerised inability to act.

The age of advertising

‘Promotion,’ Baudrillard writes, ‘is the most thick-skinned parasite in our culture. It would undoubtedly survive a nuclear conflict... it allows us to turn the world and the violence of the world into a consumable substance’ (Baudrillard, 2018, 31). Whereas the age of

Box 5.3 Apply it: locating ‘meaning implosion’ in newspaper set texts

- Do your newspaper set texts offer oppositional points of view?
- How might those presentations affect audience readings of those news stories?
- In what ways are audiences immune to the ever-present nature of news media?
- Are audience reactions to news events minimised as a result of the ever-changing cycle of news stories?

Exemplar: *The Daily Mirror* (Eduqas). The multiple perspectives offered across different newspapers and also within single products – as evidenced in *The Daily Mirror* set text through the diverse opinion editorials of Corbyn, Blanchard and Jones – leads to what Baudrillard calls ‘meaning implosion’. The ideas and meanings of news products are neutralised, leading audiences to respond with what Baudrillard describes as ‘hyperreal inertia’ – a mesmerised yet transient engagement that prevents readers and viewers from gaining an objective sense of the real world at large.

Further set text help is available for a range of products for all exam boards at www.essentialmediatheory.com

modernity was dominated by cinema and photography, advertising, Baudrillard tells us, presides over the postmodern age. That ascendancy, Baudrillard further explains, has important repercussions in that the narrative strategies laid down by television and print-based advertising form a story blueprint that influences other media products, while also configuring audiences to respond to those narratives with hyperreal ‘inertia’.

Advertising, Baudrillard suggests, holds us in a hypnotic state of ‘superficial saturation and fascination’ (Baudrillard, 2018, 91), teaching us from an early age that the mesmerising ideals of commercial advertising are rarely realised in real life. The ensuing mistrust of commercial media imagery, Baudrillard further argues, is readily applied to other media forms. We are compelled to watch, he says, but we do not quite believe what we see.

Baudrillard suggests, too, that the language and narrative structures of advertising have infected other media products. News bulletins, for

Box 5.4 Apply it: how might advertising lead audiences to respond with hyperreal inertia?

Advertising set text applications

- Do your set text advertising products nurture mistrust? Are they too ideal to be believed?
- In what ways do the exaggerated worlds of the advertising set texts feel fake or too ideal?

Exemplar: *Maybelline – That Boss Life* (AQA). *That Boss Life* constructs a conventional transformation narrative, aiming to position its audience to think that the use of its Big Shot product will ultimately lead to an idealised metropolitan New York lifestyle. The use of slow motion sequences, of flawless presenters, and of the golden ambience of the product’s penthouse setting presents a dream-like tone that is both seductive and mesmerising. Yet, Baudrillard would also argue, audiences intuit that the world depicted lies beyond their reach and that its hyperreal gloss is both inauthentic and fake. Audiences might be seduced, Baudrillard argues, but they are also inert, and, more dangerously, that inertia carries into the readings made of the wider media those audiences consume.

Further set text help is available for a range of products for all exam boards at www.essentialmediatheory.com

example, are reduced to easily digestible packages, their stories built upon the same strategies of suspense and revelation that we find in short-form advertising. Politicians, too, Baudrillard argues, have sacrificed debate and argument for news friendly sound bites designed to effect political branding and voter seduction. Drama, too, pulses in shorter and shorter scenes, while YouTube vloggers have swallowed, wholesale, advertising’s commercial mantra by commodifying themselves – branding themselves in the same way that a shampoo advert might affect audience appeal via choreographed representations of impossible ideals.

Fictionalised reality/realised fiction

The blending of media forms is a further symptom of our hyperreal age. Baudrillard tells us that products borrow and steal at will in order

to attract our attention in today's media saturated landscape. As a result, contemporary media forms have blurred fact and fiction to the extent that, Baudrillard argues, audiences can no longer tell them apart.

Documentaries cast their participants as if they were actors, deliberately orchestrating moments of narrative crisis to produce entertainment. *Geordie Shore*, *TOWIE* and *Love Island* might cast participants from the real world, but no one is fooled. Contestants knowingly engineer their onscreen selves to maximise the opportunities such shows present, guided, of course, by the careful hand of TV producers so that their cast might satisfy audience expectation. There is little that is 'real' in today's reality TV.

Baudrillard suggests that the news similarly effects an ever-present discourse of fictionalised crisis, generating daily doses of real life entertainment that are populated by cameos of TV savvy politicians and business leaders who are media trained so that they might deliver news friendly sound bites. News narratives, too, replicate the language and imagery of disaster movies. The news is a never-ending soap opera, packaged into easily digestible parcels, into three act narratives that are instantly forgotten once delivered. Any meanings and emotions produced are temporary, Baudrillard argues, replaced by the next news cycle in an 'accelerated circulation of meaning' (Baudrillard, 2018, 80).

The shallowness of contemporary media hyperreality, Baudrillard further argues, produces a deep yearning by media audiences for products that provide authenticity. The endless churn of contemporary culture, he tells us, produces a requisite desire for stability and validity that the media tries to satisfy through nostalgic appeals and an attempt to embed reality in programming.

The real world has thus become a staple ingredient in postmodern fiction. Biopics and historical drama readily reinterpret history without due regard for historical accuracy – repackaging the world of yesterday using stock characters and audience-friendly narrative formulas. Horror films also call upon their audiences to believe that their narratives are genuine through the ubiquitous 'based on real events' tagline. The word 'based', of course, gives due licence to magnify, distort or change any element of the writer's choosing. And, of course, soap operas, crime dramas, family dramas and work-based dramas purport to offer us a view of the world using the tropes of realism to convince us of their actuality, yet do so in ways that reflect nothing of reality at all.

Box 5.5 Think about it: does the media produce a fictionalised version of reality?

- To what extent are audiences aware that reality TV is manufactured?
- What TV products do you watch that claim to deal with real life yet depict reality using the strategies of fictional products? Think here about documentaries, historical dramas, biopics and even the news.
- What fiction-based narrative strategies do non-fiction forms use to present real world events? Think about characterisation, story structure, editing techniques and language devices.
- Can fictionalised realities have an impact on the real world?

Box 5.6 Apply it: diagnose the use and effect of 'realised fiction' in your set texts

- Do any of your set texts use historical settings as their story premise?
- Do shows make appeals to audience nostalgia?
- Do shows blend archive footage with drama to convince us of their real world settings?

Exemplar: *Deutschland 83* (OCR). Baudrillard suggests that the surface values of postmodern hyperreality produce a deep yearning for that which is authentic or real. Arguably, the use of historical verisimilitude as a narrative ingredient within fictionalised television drama creates products that anchor that need through the use of nostalgia. *Deutschland 83* clearly evidences this approach. The use of authentic footage of 1980s icon Ronald Reagan provides an instant point of nostalgic reference for the product's audience, further reinforced within the title sequence through its archive-driven montage. *Deutschland 83*, however, also references an imagined or fictionalised East Germany – the East Germany of television spy movies. It's canted cinematography, it's spy-based characters (the rebel, the double agent, the master spy) are stereotypical expectations of the genre. The resulting blend of fact and fiction leads us to conclude that *Deutschland 83* is most assuredly a post-modern text – a text that Baudrillard might suggest distances us from authentic experience rather than bringing us closer to it.

Further set text help is available for a range of products for all exam boards at www.essentialmediatheory.com

Table 5.1 Know it: Baudrillard's three phases of the simulacra

Phase	Historical time period	Key features
Early modernity	Renaissance to the early Industrial Revolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited cultural production. • Cultural production is dominated by a few authors (the church and the state). • The masses are held firmly in their positions by cultural messages.
Modernity	The Industrial Revolution to the Second World War	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural representations begin to break down – producing multiple versions of reality. • Cultural production is dominated by the bourgeoisie and legitimises the capitalist system. • Mass media forms dominate.
Postmodernity	Post Second World War onwards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The media produces hyperreality – an explosion of meaning. • The media makes everyone a consumer – audiences have a limited relationship with authentic meanings. • Advertising and television ascend as the dominant cultural forces. • Contemporary digital technologies accelerate the effects of postmodernity.

Table 5.2 Speak Jean Baudrillard

Hyperreality	Baudrillard suggests that we are unable to separate the real world from that which is manufactured by the media. In this sense we live in a world that is beyond reality or is hyperreal.
Inertia	The constant stream of media that we are subjected to paralyses us or makes us unable to feel or act in a way that creates deep meaning.
Meaning implosion	The sheer volume of media and the multiplicity of voices within the contemporary media landscape produces a cocktail of opinion and counter opinion that audiences cannot disentangle.
Media blending	Media forms in the postmodern age blur – the narrative strategies of news, for example, become absorbed into fiction and vice versa.

Table 5.3 Baudrillard: ten minute revision

Key concept: *from the real to the hyperreal*

- Baudrillard suggests that there have been three distinct cultural phases: pre-modernity, modernity and postmodernity.
- We now live in the postmodern age which is marked by a massive proliferation in media content and media messages.
- Media proliferation has resulted in an implosion of meaning through the simultaneous presentation of oppositional truths.
- Media proliferation is enabled through the endless copying of pre-existing media. Media forms 'blend' and hybridise during this copying process.
- The postmodern age is marked by the dominance of advertising as a media form. Advertising has also impacted on other media forms creating hyperreal inertia.
- Baudrillard suggests that media blending has resulted in the construction of fictionalised reality.
- Audiences yearn for authenticity in postmodernity; the media industry tries to satisfy this yearning through realised fiction.

Two theorists who might challenge Baudrillard's thinking

- **Roland Barthes:** would argue that media products have a clear relationship with reality. Media texts represent and naturalise the world views of those who hold power in society.
- **Henry Jenkins:** would contest the idea that postmodernity results in hyperreal inertia. Contemporary digital media, he would argue, can make a positive difference in the real world through the use of participatory culture.