

Baudrillard's Critical Theory of Political Economy

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Abstract: Baudrillard is a famous French postmodern philosopher with a vast array of theories and writings. Based on Baudrillard's reflection on Marx's critique of political economy, the article takes the social and ideological origins of the theory of mimesis as the starting point of the study. Unlike Marx, Baudrillard's theory of mimesis involves a 'model' that appears as the initial form of the mimesis. Baudrillard's argument that the proliferation of mimesis and simulation has led to the demise of the real, and that the real world can be produced through modelling without the need for prototypes, adds a new dimension to reflections on Marx's critical theory of society, and expands the horizons and methodologies of contemporary Marxist research. The paper traces the premise and development of the theory of mimesis by analysing the turn towards consumer society, and presents the specifics of mimesis theory as a whole by keeping in mind Baudrillard's principle of symbolic exchange and his reflections on modern technology. This paper analyses the concept of mimesis based on Baudrillard's later theories, and attempts to explain the specific connotations of mimesis and its related concepts. This paper focuses on three related concepts of mimesis: "mimesis", "hyperreal" and "implosion", and explains in detail the differences between these four concepts on the basis of Baudrillard's work. Based on Baudrillard's work, the differences between these four concepts are explained in detail. Explores the symbolic order, social entities, and media influences in which the concept of "mimesis" occurs.

Keywords: Baudrillard, symbols, consumption

1. Introduction

The critique of political economy, as a theory that inquires into the nature and structure of society, is not just an analysis of the capitalist mode of production, but an in-depth analysis of the overall structure of capitalist society. Marx's critical theory of political economy suggests that the fundamental contradiction in capitalist society lies in the objectification of human relations into object relations. At the same time, the labour process of the worker is regarded as a value-enhancing process for capital. Baudrillard, a leading French thinker of the 20th century, succeeded Marx in observing the impact of the age of capital on politics and the economy, and further analysed it by directly addressing the structure of commodities in circulation. This view echoes Foucault's critique of modernity in that both seek to reveal the process of the construction of power and knowledge in modern societies and the place and role of the individual in this process.

Baudrillard's critical theory of political economy was shaped by the circumstances of his time. After the Second World War, Western capitalist societies entered a new stage of development, a stage that saw significant new changes in the areas of production and consumption. While affecting the development of capitalist production and economic progress, the management of production and the structure of industry have also brought about changes in capitalist economic relations and the economic system. This led him to critically inherit and develop Marx's political economy, as reflected in his reinterpretation and expansion of Marx's concept of labour, his critique of capitalism, and his critique of fetishism.

Baudrillard further points out that with the advent of the consumer society, the cult of the symbol replaces the cult of the object, and thus the critique of fetishism must move from a critique of the logic of production to a critique of the logic of the symbol. He specifies that signs make meaning and symbols, which is the secret of capitalist consumer control, where the logic of consumption is defined as symbolic manipulation.

2. Symbol consumption

2.1. Symbolic value and consumption society

Commodity fetishism reveals that people regard labor and its products as natural attributes rather than as the result of social relations, thus ignoring the interpersonal relations and social structures behind commodities. This phenomenon is particularly evident in capitalist society, where the mystique and fetishism of commodities derive from the very stipulation that the products of Labour take the form of commodities. In *Capital*, Marx criticizes capitalist political economy by taking commodities as the logical starting point, and reveals the basic characteristics of commodity economy and the contradiction between social labor and private labor. Marx discovered the dialectical relationship between production and consumption: on the one hand, production determines consumption, on the other hand, consumption also promotes production, and even becomes a driving force for production. In the capitalist society, objectification rule and objectification consciousness have become the natural existence, and the liberation of the proletariat needs to break fetishism from the consciousness. Baudrillard's theory of symbol manipulation was put forward in the context of consumer society. He pointed out that with the coming of consumer society and the guiding role of media in it, the worship of symbols replaced the worship of things.

Baudrillard further analyzed the symbolic fetishism in the consumer society. In the consumer society, the value and meaning of symbols replace the use value of things and become the object of people's pursuit and worship. This theory emphasizes the importance of symbol value in modern society, and symbol fetishism is a new form of capital fetishism in consumer society. Baudrillard declared: "The subject of consumption is the subject of symbols [1]." Consumption reveals people's status and identity, and forms a code with hierarchical meaning.

Consumption in modern capitalist society is actually a system of communication between different codes, in which people acquire a certain symbolic identity. This kind of symbol consumption is not only the pursuit of commodities, but also the pursuit of the meaning of symbols. People consume symbols to pursue taste, self-satisfaction and social approval. This pursuit leads to people's "symbol alienation", that is, people are alienated and manipulated by symbols. In a commodity society, capital's absolute pursuit of profit results in a relative surplus of commodities. This relative surplus not only prevented the profit sought by capital from being realized, but also caused the economic crisis of capitalism and gave rise to the proletarian revolutionary movement. This is Marx's incisive exposition and fierce criticism in political economy, and the capitalists do not want to see[2]. Under advanced capitalism, the common people are controlled not only by the necessity of subsistence labor,

but also by the difference of signs. The consumption of different symbols is to create social classes and differences.

2.2. Consumer culture and mass media

After an insightful critical analysis of modern capitalist consumption, *The Consumer Society* moves into a discussion of the role of advertising in consumption control. Baudrillard believes that "what the consumer masses do not have, the grassroots consumer will never spontaneously produce any demand: only after the 'choice package', it has the chance to appear in the 'standard package' of demand". Independent and free consumer subject does not exist, it is an illusion subject created by the mass media such as advertising. The strategic goal of advertising is not people's conscious awareness at all, but unconscious persuasion [1].

The trick and strategic value of advertising is to arouse everyone's desire for the myth of objectifying society through the other. It never speaks to a single person, but targets him in a discriminating relationship, as if to capture his deeper motives. Since man always desires the desires of the other, the strategy of advertising is to create in the mirror of the other a mythical situation of the objectified society to which everyone identifies. As a mass media of symbolic reproduction, advertising firmly grasps people's deep psychological needs, and connects commodities with consumers, individual consumers with mass consumers by forging a kind of consumption totality. Under the encouragement of advertising, individuals follow the pace of consumption of the public, and only consumption can be recognized and cared for, otherwise it will be abandoned by The Times [3].

Baudrillard believes that in the late capitalist society, signs and symbols are the concentrated embodiment of the alienation in the field of consumption. The symbol and symbol constitute the recessive means of the post-modern capital to rule the consumer power [4]. In capitalist society, the change of consumption mode marks the transition from a production society to a consumer society, and consumption, in the form of an ideology, dives into the mass unconsciousness through symbol coding and becomes an effective means to maintain capitalist rule. Symbol consumption is not only the result of individual choice, but also a part of the internal operation of the capitalist system, which is the comprehensive penetration of capital logic into social life. In this process, the role of symbols becomes crucial. The symbolic attributes of commodities are further highlighted, thus giving birth to the so-called "symbol economy". The value of a product is no longer determined solely by its use value, but more by the emotion or sense of identity it inspires in the consumer. This symbol-based economic activity is actually a process of symbolic manipulation.

The culprit of creating false events is not only a commodity advertisement, but the mass media as the carrier of advertisement is also an accomplice to the real murder." What we get from mass communication is not reality, but the vertigo of reality." The exploitation of symbols in late capitalist society mainly seduces and manipulates consumers' symbolic consumption through mass media. This phenomenon is not only reflected in material consumption, but also reflects an ideology. High-end advertising is about wanting people to be controlled in an unconscious fantasy." Advertising is neither to be understood nor to be learned, but to be hoped, and in this sense it is a prophetic discourse [1]. In Baudrillard's view, it is today's ubiquitous advertising that falsifies a "totality of consumption." It makes one symbol refer to another symbol, one object refer to another, and one consumer refer to another consumer. Symbolic consumption becomes part of capitalist ideology, thus maintaining the rule of capitalist society [4].

3. Hyper-realism and simulacrum

Baudrillard argues that reality is defined as "that which may produce an equivalent copy", and that as the process of copying is pushed to its limits, reality disappears, and the real becomes not only replicable, but also "hyperreal". This created reality is the "hyper-reality", and from this point of view, it fundamentally changes people's long-established conception of reality.

With the advancement of modern science and technology, Baudrillard's main idea in creating "simulacrum theory" was to set a coordinate system for postmodern culture in terms of historical sequence. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard introduced the "three levels of simulacrum". He argues that the three sequences of imitation match the mutations in the law of value, in order of progression since the Renaissance: counterfeit was the dominant mode in the "classical" period from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution; production was the dominant mode in the industrial era; simulation was the dominant mode in the current era dominated by code; production is the main mode of the industrial age; simulation is the dominant mode of the current age, which is dominated by code [5].

The first level of imitation follows the natural law of value. Imitation came with the Renaissance, with the deconstruction of the feudal order, a deconstruction that was accomplished by open competition at the level of the bourgeois order and the symbols of difference. There is no fashion in hierarchical societies because there is a comprehensive rule that symbols are subordinate to class, that every symbol points to a status without ambiguity, and that symbols always go hand in hand with transparency and cruelty. From the Renaissance onwards, when hierarchy was dissolved and symbols were open to all classes of people, its meaning became more complex and pluralistic, and the arbitrariness of symbols began when the canonical referent no longer connects two people with an impenetrable mutuality. Commodities at this stage are produced mainly by imitating objects in nature, with the aim of satisfying demand in the marketplace. Man and nature constitute a de facto mirror relationship. Moreover, the question of authenticity never arises, and the existence of the work of art is not threatened by its reproduction. While reproductions exist, artworks that are facsimiles exist on an equal footing with the originals, and in this order, forgeries never existed. At this stage, imitation has its counterpart, the "original", the law of nature that takes over everything [6]. On a social level, the imitation pattern breaks down the traditional hierarchy, the bourgeoisie creates its own image of the world and its own way of looking at it, and constructs a new system of manipulation of the world's functioning.

With the deepening of the industrialisation of the society, the simulacrum of the image develops into the second stage - production, in which the most characteristic feature is the complete disappearance of the differences between the imitation and the prototype, the elimination of the definite references between them by the production, and the transformation of the production into a large-scale reproduction of the symbolic system. Along with the maturity of mechanical reproduction technology, a large number of imitations were produced, which had broken away from the shackles of the prototype and did not differ from it in any way, and the relationship between the imitations and the symbols changed from the first stage of resemblance to undifferentiated equivalence. In contrast to the first order, in the second order the art of imitation has become illegal and the concept of forgery has emerged. In the Sequence, a system of reproduction in an infinite loop of replication is constantly played out, where the analogy of objects is outlawed by the indifference of the Sequence, where there are "no images, no echoes, no mirrors, no representations".

The "simulacrum" of the second order eliminates the reality in the "simulacrum - production" shift [7]. In *Symbolic Criticism and Death*, Baudrillard uses automaton puppets and robots to analogise the first and second orders respectively. He compares the first order to automaton puppets, arguing that the first order is governed by the principle of technology, and establishes an analogous relationship

between man and nature, which pursues appearances and strives for resemblance to man's outward appearance, and is a perfect replica of man's image. The second order is like a robot; the machine, as the equivalent of the human being, no longer asks questions about appearances because it no longer seeks to resemble the human form; its only truth is mechanical efficiency. Whereas the first order seeks to achieve the goal of falsifying the real, the second order removes the real through mass reproduction and obeys only the logic of industrial production.

The third order of simulacrum is the mimetic order, the rune-based contemporary, the post-industrial era in which we now live. The third order of mimesis is the mimetic order, the rune-based contemporary, the post-industrial era in which we now live. Baudrillard identifies the progression from reproduction to mimesis in traditional epistemology in this way, "(1) it is a projection of some magnificent reality; (2) it obscures the magnificent reality and is heterogeneous to its essence; (3) it nullifies this magnificence; (4) it has nothing at all to do with what is called the real, it is its own mimesis in its purest form." [7] The first of these stages is in the representational stage of traditional epistemology, which resembles a projection of the real and shows reproducibility. The second and third stages are mimesis and magic, respectively. The fourth stage corresponds exactly to the third order of mimesis, the mimetic order. The symbol gains true freedom.

Baudrillard emphasises that modern society is a simulation of reality, where games operate according to their own rules. In our modern society, games take their place and function according to their own rules. This means that we no longer live in reality. However, the mimetic images of our reality are not just elements of the game or of certain social relations, they are endowed with a strong authority that helps to construct the game in the simulated reality. In the second stage the mimesis are not just elements of the game or of certain social relations, but they are also endowed with a strong authority that contributes to the construction of the game in the simulated reality. Here the relationship between mimicry and the original changes and they acquire a status not of opposition but of analogy and reflection. There is a sameness in the game itself within these boundaries, which together with the mimesis transforms into reality itself. And in the present phase of mimesis, surrealism replaces reality partly. The latter becomes casual and acquires a more playful character. [8] From a more general point of view, the runic code is proliferating and spreading as it is now seizing the social world for all eternity. At this stage we are at the end point of difference, where all things interpenetrate. [5]

4. Conclusion

Baudrillard replaced Marxian commodity fetishism with symbolic fetishism and constructed a hyperreal symbolic world. Baudrillard's definition of the hyperreal can be interpreted in several dimensions. From a material-technological point of view, the reproduction of "original" mimesis without the "original" derives from digitally mediated models. This suggests that in postmodern societies, the development of digital and informational technologies has led to a blurring of the line between the real and the imaginary, with people living in a virtual world constructed from digital models. Imagery replaces reality with highly realistic audiovisuals, while many realities that do not exist in real life have been created by a wide range of modern communication methods.

In Baudrillard's philosophical legacy, particularly in works such as *The Consumer Society* and *The Code*, we find an approach to play as a signifier of contemporary reality. The category of play is an integral part of market relations; in the sense that play is tightly contained within a specific concept that characterises the process of existence in modern society, the game clothed in the principles of play in post-industrial societies is a signifier that operates on its own terms, as a product of modernity and its own rules.

At this point there is no longer any connection between the symbolic and the real, and it operates on the principle of value structure, slowly evolving into a system of independent symbols. The

boundary between the real and the imitation is broken, and the imitation is no longer an imitation but a direct substitute for the prototype, and in this way the reference system of value is destroyed, reflecting side by side the uncertainty that symbolic freedom brings to society. The proliferation of replica objects is unknowingly embedded in every aspect of people's daily lives, and people are becoming more and more familiar and accustomed to this simulated world. Baudrillard describes this state of society with a new term, simulacra, which in his view creates a "reality" that is different from the "reality" that one sees with one's eyes. The "reality" created by simulacra is not the same as the "reality" seen by people's eyes; it is a virtual reality that transcends the existing reality, and it emphasises the simulation or reproduction of the existing real thing. Baudrillard emphasised that modern society is a simulation of reality, where the game runs according to its own rules. Simulations are not just elements of games or certain social relationships, but they are also endowed with a strong authority that contributes to the construction of games in simulated reality [8]. From a more general point of view, the rune code is proliferating and spreading as it is now seizing the social world for all eternity. At this stage, we are at the end point of difference, where all things interpenetrate.

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