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Imagination of our Present: Jean Baudrillard from the The System of Objects to the Domotics and the Internet of Things

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Abstract

The article reflects on the connections between Baudrillard's first reflections on space, design and technology and the contemporary innovations that blurred completely the border between virtual and real. Just because not so present in the international debate on the new web as in the nineties, Jean Baudrillard's work still deserves to be rediscovered and applied to the innovations that mark our time. Probably only authors such as Geert Lovink (2011) are using the reference to the French philosopher to establish a union trait between the old web and the so-called web 2.0. This is why it might be more useful to reflect on how the visionary character of Baudrillard has anticipated a future vision, still to be explored systematically. For this reason in the following article I will try to compare Baudrillard's first work which is an insightful dissertation on the relationship between the virtual space of communication and the physical space of the architecture, forerunning one of the latest trends in digital innovation that is the integration between bits and atoms as in the recent debate on the end of the 'digital dualism' (Jurgenson, 2011).

Keywords: space, furniture, functional, metafunctional, robot, gadget, domotics, virtuality, augmented reality, ontobranding.

1. Introduction

Baudrillard's most popular concept is the simulacra as the core of a reflection on media and digital innovation involving the relationship between virtual and real. In the final part of his career, the philosopher developed a

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sort of implicit critique to the domination of the reality made by the virtual world, after the tragic event of the 11/9. *The spirit of terrorism* (2002) introduces a decisive question that we could almost consider as a self-criticism to the very conception of the virtuality as a final stage of the simulacrum.

And in this singular event, in this Manhattan disaster movie, the twentieth century's two elements of mass fascination are combined: the white magic of the cinema and the black magic of terrorism; the white light of the image and the black light of terrorism (pp. 29-30)... The image consumed the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption (p. 27). We might almost say that reality is jealous of fiction, that the real is jealous of the image... It is a kind of duel between them, a contest to see which can be the most unimaginable (Baudrillard, 2002: 28).

If the global imagery generated by Hollywood suggested the idea that the spectacular catastrophe is the one represented by the fiction, the 9/11 event shows how the reality can be even more spectacular than the fiction. In this competition between the virtual event and the real one, Baudrillard argues that the reality can compete with the imagery because it has absorbed the virus of the spectacle. The idea of a challenge between reality and image to those who are more 'unimaginable' is linked to the liberation of history from the reference orbit of reality can produce a hyper-history that competes with the imaginary in the breakdown of the catastrophe. Yet in this mutual contamination, the imaginary also undergoes a drastic revision of its ends, curbing on reality to begin to nourish history, singularity, and authenticity. In this sense, Baudrillard captures the general trend of the new millennium culture beyond the euphoric enthusiasm and hangover of the so-called utopia of communication. For this reason it is necessary to return to the principle of its speculation by examining the key steps of the System of Objects in order to identify in this work some key themes that will be 'implemented' by the latest digital innovations.

The text begins with a dual theoretical aims:

(A) to identify some principles of classification of the contemporary commodity system;

(B) to investigate the use or the relationship between the subject and the network of objects around him.

2. Research

As will be seen in this article, the two different instances are not at all divergent and the impossibility of formulating a general, classifying principle

to unify the plethora of everyday objects is associated with the need to identify a moving, dynamic, eteroclite principle through which the object allows us to define its location in our world. In this sense, the text is in continuity with the famous introductory speech by Michel Foucault in *The Words and Things* (1966, 1994). Modernity with its proliferation of speeches, places, devices, and so on, breaks the taxonomic unit of the 'classical era' and imposes a chaotic classification principle in which the container must adapt, reminiscent of the fierce variety of content.

That passage from Borges kept me laughing a long time, though not without a certain uneasiness that I found hard to shake off. Perhaps because there arose in its wake the suspicion that there is a worse kind of disorder than that of the incongruous, the linking together of things that are inappropriate; I mean the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the heteroclite; and that word should be taken in its most literal, etymological sense: in such a state, things are 'laid', 'placed', 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible (Foucault 1994: XVII-XVIII).

Commenting the Borges' impossible taxonomy, Foucault tries to identify a logic space which is able to contain the disorder and the diversity of things. This is called the eteroclite. Certainly a long time has passed since the encyclopaedia designed during the Enlightenment tried to gather the variety of bodies created by God and man, bringing them into an universal tree. The rupture produced by the techno-industrial progress has greatly offset the relationship between nature's products and man's products, to a deliberate rise of the latter, even almost 'it would appear that the vocabulary no longer suffices to name them'. The ontological tear produced by industrial production breaks the balance between the syntax of words and objects, resulting in a total unbalancing of the society towards the second. The object now seems to be experiencing an unexpected revival, and certainly the way Baudrillard intends this notion is far from the material value that gives him the common sense. The object, of course, is not just an object. After the reflection of the anthropology of goods (Douglas, Isherwood, 1979), we can conceive the commodity as a medium, a vehicle continually renegotiating meanings. The gaze that the philosopher directs towards the objects is very similar to the one of the semiologist. It observes a communicating object that works functionally in a technical apparatus aimed at satisfying certain needs through the invention of new practices. These are at the same time an obstacle to the spread of new products but also the source of inspiration for new inventions. It is not a coincidence that the techneme is defined as the

minimum unit of the techno-productive system, occupying a position similar to that of the phoneme in the language. Techneme is a sui generis unit as it is at the same time object, device and principle of classification of the object to which it refers. It indicates the stage of an ontological regime in which there is still equilibrium, symmetry and correspondence between words and things. This balance is not only quantitative – in terms of quantity of goods in relation to the names that designate them – but also qualitative in the sense that the object as a single unit is the result of a relatively balanced relationship between matter and shape, physical and virtual identity. For this reason, the investigation focuses on a certain kind of objects in which a nucleus of material gravity can still be found that saves them from the fate of a world abandoned to the artificiality. It is not a case that the analysis takes the foot from the closest environment surrounding the body, towards which we develop an immediate ‘practical’ attitude: home. The principle that regulates the diversity of objects within a bourgeois room, together with their references and their mutual implications, is defined as ‘moral’. The monumentality of furniture in the living rooms and in the traditional bedrooms is built around a core of intimacy that must be protected and cultivated. In this sense, the symbolic thickness of manufacturing materials corresponds to the moral or sentimental thickness of a permanent network of relationships that is clearly sanctioned: the ‘cuts between interior and exterior’ as well as the ‘formal opposition’ under the social sign of the property and under the psychological sign of the ‘familiar immanence’ (Baudrillard 1996: 20). On the opposite side is the modern environment – of young couples or singles – who for the sake of mobility and space are bound to surround with essential items without too many horns. Furniture that, ‘dried up’ to their essential function, turns out to be free or liberated in achieving their pure functionality. However, this ‘emancipation’ of the object would correspond to a subject that is no longer ‘liberated’ because it is only recognized as the user of the object in question: ‘the object is liberated only in its function, man equally is liberated only as a user of that object’ (Baudrillard 1996: 18).

In the logical opposition between a traditional environment (governed by a principle of nature) and a modern environment (inspired by a principle of pure abstraction), Baudrillard identifies a third indispensable orientation for understanding today’s consumption that is capable to assign the same moral value to traditional furnishings as well as to the smooth surfaces of the modern environment. This orientation expresses exemplarily the disruptive anthropological transformation of the subject and the relationship with his primary environment. It is no coincidence that the new forms of living are characterized by an ‘active environment informer’ who uses ‘space as a distribution structure’ and that ‘by controlling this space, it has in his hand

every possibility of mutual relationship and consequently the totality of roles that objects can take' (Baudrillard 1996: 27). In a few lines, a paradigmatic turn of the initial thesis is celebrating. The world of things – which places the subject inside by relegating it to the role of 'end user' of functions distributed in the objects – tends today to overturn this perspective drastically. The functional project is also supported by the advertising (his imaginary anchor) when it joins new suggestions passing through a rhetoric made of emotional expressions. Simple language solutions like 'to your taste', 'according to your needs', 'this atmosphere will be yours,' 'personalization' and so on. They acquire the function of real cognitive environments that point to a new way of conceiving the technique. This is certainly an atavistic concept, but it can be understood today as an emerging or re-emerging trend of contemporary societies: the idea of a subject as a 'vessel of inwardness' (Baudrillard 1996: 28).

The functional object is generated as tearing or betrayal of the requirements that governed the traditional system: the primary function of the object; driving and primary needs; reciprocal symbolic relationship (81). However, it is not possible to conceive the famous category of goods-sign in the sense of a total overcoming of the previous stage that generates an abstract system of empty, interchangeable and totally manipulable meaning. While it is true that formal objects preserve the historical memory of their ancient, craftsman-unique colleagues – the 'fascination of an earlier life' – they continue to claim the strategic importance of nature – or rather naturalness, of a totally natural nature, 'culturalized' in a synthetic and artificial world. The analysis of the marginal object allows us to infer, from the singularity of the product, an emerging system of collective orientations, almost a trend. There is, in fact, a non-arbitrary link connecting the question of naturality (which today is re-explored on a global scale thanks to green marketing and megatrend of eco-sustainability), that of the historicity (linked to the 'myth of origin') and that of authenticity exotic cultures or urban subcultures). In the union of these three fundamental principles, we see a single large process of revision of the dynamics of contemporary consumption. It is no coincidence that the latest marketing orientations of contemporary marketing, the so-called post-Kotlerian marketing, assimilate these guidelines into an anthropological shift that emphasizes the role of the past, of tradition, of a re-territorialized consumption experience, so that we can talk today in terms of a general Marketing of authenticity. Unfortunately, Baudrillard can not explain these guidelines within a more complete definition of a brand than the author merely discusses with simplicity and in a traditional way: the signage and the affective one (236).

The psychological restructuring of the consumer is performed through a single word – Philips, Olida, General Motors – a word capable of summing up both the diversity of objects and a host of diffuse meanings. Words of synthesis summarizing a synthesis of affects: that is the miracle of the ‘psychological label’. In effect this is the only language in which the object speaks to us, the only one it has invented (...). It is an erratic lexicon where one brand devours the other, each living for its own endless repetition. This is undoubtedly the most impoverished of languages: full of signification and empty of meaning. It is a language of signals. And the ‘loyalty’ to a brand name is nothing more than the conditioned reflex of a controlled affect (Baudrillard, 1996: 209-210).

While recognizing the concept of brand as the fundamental role in regulating the ‘language of consumption’, the French philosopher remains too constrained to a classical analysis in terms of a consumption sociology that emphasizes the status issue rather than deepening consumer terms as ‘expressive’ or self-expressive language. It is no coincidence that, just when the analysis is more careful about the relationship between consumer personality and product customization (quoting also Riesman) the definitive end of the System is to provide an ‘articulated range of personalities’ (208). In one single description, Baudrillard is able to criticize the nature and the use of brands, at the same time showing the ways in which this classic conception has been overwhelmed in the last two decades. The enthusiasm for authentication of the subject goes in the direction of and extreme alienation as in the Riesman’s idea of and hetero-direct individual. On one hand this process is despicable because in the combinatorial game lies an alarming ‘ideological matrix’ (153), on the other it is necessary to admit that ‘even superficial differences are real as soon as they become invested with value’ (153). In addition, besides lending to the neo-critical approaches to consumption, Baudrillard opens up a small gap that makes possible to see – beyond a nihilistic system hungry of authenticity – some areas in which survives the value of reality.

The same concept goes back to the analysis of the marginal system and its element: the collection. Beyond the functional structure of the space and its objects, the relation of ownership and mutual construction between the subject and the objects has to move on a metaphorical level. Only the object liberated of its function can enter into an higher dimension that exalts the contradictory aspects of the system. This is the controversial role of the collector: he is the one who has total control over the elements of the series to which it gives meaning and purpose, but he is also a slave to his own passion. In fact the true purpose of the series is to continue forever and to engage the collector in this pursuit of a goal (the completion of the series) that is always

deferred and that does not have to be satisfied; unless he wants to see the end of fascination itself. The collection retrieves the purely functional logic that is already discussed in pages dedicated to the relationship between model and series, but it transfers that logic to the intimate and concrete relationship with an object 'élite' (but also of living beings or reified relationships). Only through its collocation, finding a place in the syntactic order of the series, the object can acquire a patina of uniqueness. This makes the collection at the same time a principle of aggregation and an instrument of exhibiting a certain cultural or emotional capital. Smania of possession, fanaticism and a certain amount of fetishism distinguish the collector's world which in this sense is conceivable as the avant-garde of today's consumer relationship with goods and consumption.

On the same deviation trajectory from the standard, banal and everyday object, Baudrillard seeks to grasp with greater clarity and confidence the nature of contemporary consumption. In the triptych of 'meta and disfunctional objects', dedicated to gadget, agglomeration, and robot, the arduous exploration of the imagination of consumption is accomplished, which is generated by the relationship of double implication between 'human purposes' and the purpose of the technique. The fascinating aspect of the gadget is primarily the 'neotechnical' (122) imagery that it suggests. Almost a neo-baroque era dominated by the reassurance of pure automation so much that 'there is – there must be – a corresponding object for any operation: and if none exists, then one must be invented' (122). If the world of gadgets is made up of a plethora of objects with the meticulous – hyperspecified but equally useless feature captured by their obsessive nature, the gadget instead works on the inverse principle: a force that nests in its nominal indeterminacy, in its de-specialization that looks at a 'vague functionality' (123), multiple and unpredictable. The term itself demonstrates the rendering of language in relation to the proliferation of objects and the primacy of industrial creativity compared to what once lived in language. It then becomes clear that the proliferation of technical details causes an immense conceptual defeat, which is lagging behind the structures and functional articulation of everyday objects, so that 'in today's society there are more and more objects and less and less Concepts to designate them' (149).

Just a few lines to understand that these pages address fundamental issues both for the book's economy and for the author's broader theorization. The marginality of the agglomeration (which replaces in terms of vagueness and emptiness what was once expressed by the word 'machine') is the condensation site of an imagery that has crossed three stages: animist, energetic, cybernetic. If the first one dominates the myth of absolute organism and the second the myth of an absolute functionality, in the third triumphs an

imagery based by the myth of 'absolute interrelationality' (167). Thus, the system of objects leads us beyond the typical reflections of the nineties on technological neo-animism, on the fetishism of goods, on techno-magic, and so on. What the philosopher could imagine, without mentioning it, is the exquisitely pragmatic role through which current technology changes the relationship between imaginary and everyday life. The radical alteration of the home environment made by artificial intelligence and cybernetics, in the experiments of the so-called domotic, represent the most vivid realization of the starting hypothesis of the book. In fact as he could forecast in that period, also the relationship between personalization and automation is not just oppositional but more complementary.

In this sense personalization and automation do not contradict one another in the slightest. Automatist is simply personalization dreamt in terms of the object. It is the most finished, the most sublime form of the inessential – of that marginal differentiation that which subetends man's personalized relationships to the objects (Baudrillard, 1996: 121)

The idea that there is a system of references and functional implications between the subject-user and the range of accessories of different nature, size, and function that inform our dwelling is the theoretical assumption of a slow but tangible revolution that will transform our lives over the coming decades. On a recent visit to the Fusionopolis Laboratories in Singapore, I have been able to personally use the new 'smart' objects that will populate our homes in the near future. Technologies such as RFID, for example, allow virtually monitoring the movements and conditions of daily use products. They offer the opportunity for goods to entertain a constant dialogue with other accessories and to make tangible the pattern of relationships that arise between different goods (household appliances, consumer goods, media content, etc.) and the subject-user. A refrigerator that analyzes the flows of goods and weighs orders according to diet and weekly deadlines.

An internal surveillance system that warns the hospital if it detects when the tenant's body is placed on the ground in an unusual position. A mattress that understands the body weight distribution if you close the shutter and turn off the lights. Small examples of how to live a home environment biologically or proximally are instantly translatable in an information flow and its relative feedback. In this sense, the principle that unites the radical heterogeneity of objects moves from the functional plane (or metaphysical for other ways) to the informational or even communicational one. The ability of the object to exchange messages with other goods, users or equipment that produced, not only gives rise to a total interaction environment in which everything

communicates, but even worse the barrier that until the nineties sealed the distance between reality and virtuality.

3. Conclusions

Beyond the successes of the domotics, the dynamic integration between these two planes represents the great revolution that draws from the tightness of the domestic space and pours over the totality of the geographic space. As Alberto Abruzzese noted, such a shift concerns an epochal transformation of living and dwelling places in the post-metropolitan dimension, which modifies the closed and segmented space of old urbanism towards a pattern of 'living connections' (Abruzzese, 2004). How to say that the great revolution that awaits us, at the time of the utmost dissemination of the so-called 'internet of things', will also follow other technological and cultural innovations. The narration of the objects will no longer be separated from its material referent. Various researches tell today about this 'embedded storytelling' that transforms objects into a dynamic and 'open source' projects controlled by our smartphones: palaces, monuments, resorts, landscapes and so on. They directly inform their services or what they think the people who have interacted with us before. The future trend shows us how technology is recomposing the fracture between the Encyclopédie and the world of things, typical of the industrial Era. The birth of Wikipedia gives digital consistency to this heterogeneous space where objects, historical characters, tourist destinations, theoretical concepts, soubrette, common people, trade brands, consumer goods, songs, bestsellers, and so on, coexists in the same conceptual space. Thanks to the new geolocate technologies, the increased reality and the Internet of things – which in various ways falls into the new category of U-Space or Universal, Unique, Ubiquo and Unisono marketplaces (Watson, Pitt, Berthon, Zinkhan, 2002) we can see the transition from Wikipedia to Ontopedia. The principles of definition/classification move from a level of formal abstraction to the reality of objects so that 'there are so many classification criteria as many as the objects themselves' (Baudrillard, 1996: 3-4). This is one of the fundamental aspects of the macroprocess that I have termed as 'ontobranding' (Barile, 2013) and announces a new way of managing the communicative processes based on artificial intelligence systems but also on new ontologies (from robot emotions to the Internet of things). In other words, the same objects become sentient and communicative media that convey their content and their relationship with the world. That is a point of irreversible breakthrough that projects us into a new world no longer 'made of' but 'made by' things.

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