ARTFORUM

SUMMER 2007

Untimely Meditations

SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER ON JEAN BAUDRILLARD

JEAN BAUDRILLARD was buried in Paris on March 13, 2007. I had learned about his death a week earlier; I was in the middle of a seminar at Columbia University, and I immediately called Marine Dupuis, his wife. Less than two years ago, when Jean was diagnosed with cancer, Marine took over, wouldn't let him go, and fought on his behalf until the very end. No one could have done it better. Jean had very specific ideas about dying. He summarized them in a song he wrote, which he read as Mike Kelley's band played on the stage at Whiskey Pete's, a casino near Las Vegas, in 1996, during the "Chance Event" organized by my wife, Chris Kraus. Jean had always wanted someone to take care of his death, and Marine, with grace, cheerfulness, and despair in her heart, allowed him to die as he wished.

Jean learned about his cancer in 2005 after he returned from a conference in Karlsruhe organized in celebration of his seventy-fifth birthday. For three days he attended all the lectures, most of them in German, which he spoke fluently (he began his career translating Brecht and Hölderlin), and he was pleased that everybody took his work very seriously. He wasn't used to that in France, where he had gained public recognition only long after becoming known worldwide. In French intellectual circles, Jean had always been the odd one out. He never went to the École Normale Supérieure, where France's upper-crust intellectuals and high-ranking civil servants are trained. In 1987, he finally presented his postdoctoral *habilitation* with *The Ecstasy of Communication* and the dozen other books he had already published, vaguely hoping to get a chair at the Sorbonne—which he was never offered. It was all the more ironic that at his funeral French minister of culture Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres concluded his speech by saying, awkwardly, that he wished he had spoken to Baudrillard in person.

Jean Baudrillard in Paris, 1986. Photo: Sophie Bassouls/Corbis.

About one hundred fifty people had gathered that morning at the Cimetière de Montparnasse, a stone's throw from Jean's apartment on rue Sainte-Beuve, and many of his close friends were among them. Those who gave speeches addressed him directly, as if he were among the audience. For those who knew him in person, it was hard to accept that he wasn't. I kept looking around, expecting to see him there—his stocky body, his familiar face with its large features, his eyes twinkling behind his large glasses, his head slightly bent, listening to his own eulogies with a quiet sneer. I couldn't, however, imagine him dressed in black, not even for his own funeral. Jean wasn't a great dresser, to say the least. Once Marine showed him my own outfit as an encouragement—and I am not exactly Beau Brummell—but it was a lost cause, and we all knew it. Jean never paid any attention to those sorts of things. As Marine said, he was Baudrillard 24-7, not an easy task for anyone but him. At heart, in spite of his sophistication, he never stopped being the quintessential "French peasant," distrusting sleek city people imbued with their own importance. He wouldn't let himself be had by anyone. A lot of his distaste for contemporary culture—the inflation of signs, the extermination of values, media saturation, the rampant exchangeability of everything—may have come from there. He was fascinated by what repulsed him most. And he kept this disposition throughout his astounding rise to international stardom. *Simulations* (1983) gave him immediate standing (some would no doubt call it notoriety) in the New York art world, and painters implored him to recognize their "simulationist school." I'll always remember the way he dismissed them, coolly answering that it was a misreading of his work. Art mags all around the country ran big features reporting that he was rejecting his disciples. Jean never compromised what he thought.

Jean came from a family of farmers in the Ardennes, near the border with Germany. His parents were minor state employees, and he was the first of his family to get any kind of higher education. If it were not for Marxist liberal philosopher Henri Lefebvre noticing his dissertation—later published as *The System of Objects* (1968)—and offering him a position at the University of Nanterre in Paris, Jean may well have remained a high school German teacher for the rest of his life. "*Je ne suis qu'un petit prof' d'allemand*," he would always say to deflate any hype. He was modest at heart, but he had also read his Nietzsche thoroughly, in German, and he learned from him early on that a thinker must beware of his disciples. So when he felt drawn to Michel Foucault's ideas, he blasted his master instead, publishing *Forget Foucault* (1977) as a means of escaping his enormous influence and defining his own philosophical vocabulary.

Two years after arriving at Nanterre, Jean was thrown into the most momentous event in recent French history—May '68. Many people who take him simply for a dandy or a cynic forget the significance of these weeks of intense fever and utopia suddenly realized, which he experienced firsthand. It was all the more powerful since no one had thought it possible. For a while he became an activist, even a Maoist, but it did not take him long to realize that the same media that had snowballed the Paris events around the rest of the country, bringing General de Gaulle to his knees, had also brought about the sudden deflation that followed. Nevertheless, May '68 remained for him one of the extraordinary occasions when signs assume a singular meaning—a radical event up there with the attacks on the World Trade Center. May '68 and the twin towers were both far more formidable in their abrupt disappearance than they ever were in actuality. Indeed, after the latter event, Jean claimed that architecture had lost its ability to define space or acquire symbolic power. Architecture had nothing left to express beyond its own flat functionality, and he notoriously concluded that only those buildings that deserve to be destroyed are worth erecting.

I met Jean in the spring of 1977, in Los Angeles—an unlikely place for two Frenchmen to cross paths for the first time. He had been invited to teach for a semester at the University of California, Los Angeles, and I had flown in from New York for a lecture. No one else at UCLA seemed to know Jean was there, or really care—he was hardly known in the United States at the time. We took a walk on the beach in Marina del Rey, two exiles, past manicured lawns and tanned joggers exhibiting their vacuous physicality. The morning smog had just lifted, and we talked quietly, getting to know each other, while jets kept taking off with a thunder just above us from beyond the dunes surrounding LAX.

Jean had first come to America two years earlier, having been asked to teach at UCSD by the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson, who wanted to pick his brains. (Jean-François Lyotard and Louis Marin also taught there around this time.) At this early point in Jean's career, Jameson's gesture toward him was a thrilling invitation. And he had, by all accounts, a wonderful time: He fell passionately in love with the wife of another faculty member, and colleagues remember the pair walking barefoot in the halls of the French Department, holding hands like two flower children. But something did end up going wrong in the kingdom of San Diego: By the following year, Jean was no longer there and Jameson was warning his students against attending lectures given by "the French camp."

Around the same time, Jean's early work began to be published in English—*The Mirror of Production* in 1975 and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* in 1981. As "radical critiques" of Marx, these books understandably attracted the attention of Marxist critics like Mark Poster and Douglas Kellner, who made their careers editing and commenting on Jean's early work. They never understood his Swiftian mind (let alone his pataphysical vision of capitalism) and never stopped criticizing his "bleak fatalism," the "pessimistic implications" of his theories, and his "morose conclusions" (in Poster's words) with the awkward disclaimer that his work was "fundamental to a reconstitution of critical theory." Needless to say, Jean paid no more attention to these critiques than he did to his pants, although such simplistic tags would follow him throughout his career in the United States.

Jean was an indefatigable traveler. While staying in California, he had found the heart of American vacancy in small towns like Porterville, and in the Mojave Desert. Those who, later on, on both sides of the Atlantic, accused him of being anti-American, and took offense that he described the United States as a "primitive society" in his book *America* (1986) really didn't understand him or his work. Coming from Jean, this was a compliment. Primitive rituals of symbolic exchange were the only antidotes he knew to the ravages of capitalism. Actually, he was as much a Californian as a Frenchman could ever be: low-key, relaxed, and soft-spoken. No wonder he found in the West Coast and its resplendent artificiality "the desert of the real."

Meeting Jean on the beach that day was a turning point for both of us. But the intellectual horizon wasn't going to clear as easily as the morning smog. In Paris, in 1972, I had become close friends with Félix Guattari, whose *Anti-Oedipus*, cowritten with Gilles Deleuze, was published the same year. I shared most of their political ideas, and Foucault was their close ally. The publication of Jean's *Forget Foucault* in 1977 antagonized them all, to the extent that Jean found himself instantly excommunicated from French intellectual circles, still as exclusive as Proust's Boulevard Saint-Germain salons. Deleuze let it be known around town that he considered Baudrillard the shame of the profession. Félix condemned his fatalism and irresponsible politics, not realizing that Jean was political, if in very different ways: He was a historian of the future, looking back from the end of the world at contemporary society.

Living in the United States, I tried to ignore these kinds of antagonisms, which mostly allowed different groups of Parisian intellectuals to sharpen their differences. I had long been curious about Jean, and anyway it was difficult to re-create the Verdurin salon under a bright California sun. But French ostracism still had an effect some six thousand miles away, like the moon on the distant Pacific shores. Had Félix known that I was even talking to Jean, I was sure he would have screwed up his eyes behind his steel glasses and accused me outright of being a traitor. (Treason happened to be a positive concept for Deleuze and Guattari, however: It meant playing creatively with codes, and Jean was doing plenty of that. Actually, he was the traitor par excellence, even to his own theories.)

As I got to know Jean's work better, I wondered why my friends had been so hostile. Wasn't he exactly the kind of hero they had praised in *Anti-Oedipus*, a deterritorialized thinker surfing the flows of capital? I was thinking about publishing *Forget Foucault* in English—it is, to my mind, the best introduction to Jean's work, and raises serious questions about the nature of capitalism and the strategies meant to counter its effects. Granted, Jean had gone out of his way to counter the "libidinal theories" Deleuze and Guattari espoused. For him these theories were vain attempts to redirect the course of capital's exchangeability. In Jean's view, the entire system was now swamped by indeterminancy: Reality had already been subsumed by the hyperreal, which merely simulated itself. Foucault's genealogical approach, on the other hand, had been crucial. For Jean, the excommunication of insanity in the seventeenth century that Foucault had revealed in *Madness and Civilization* (1961) anticipated the exclusion of death from society, a foundational event that led to the development of capitalism. From then on, the principle of monetary equivalence increasingly took precedence over the kind of symbolic exchange practiced in traditional societies, potlatchlike rituals in which surplus possessions were ceremonially destroyed. Jean considered the reenactment of such agonistic rituals to be the last rampart against progress and accumulation. He was convinced that, left to its own devices, capitalistic exchangeability would ineluctably lead to the implosion of contemporary society.

The sun was pretty high by now, and we stopped to look at the waves crashing on the shores of the New World. Hollywood was over there, and the cliffs of Malibu dissolving in the heat. The jets kept roaring past us. In 1940, the Stukas too were flying low, spraying the population with their machine guns. Jean's family was among the first to be evacuated, he told me, as the panicked crowds were spilling onto the roads leading to Paris. He was riding in an oxcart with his grandparents, on top of mattresses and pots and pans. He was eleven then, and I was two, tossed about as well on the roads farther south. No wonder we both looked at the world with a certain detachment. It still makes me feel a bit dizzy thinking of him in an oxcart: from there to *The Matrix*. I told Jean that I was Félix's friend and he didn't seem to mind. We joked about the new book project. "We should call it 'Remember Foucault,'" Jean quipped, and we both laughed. But I realized this venture would be tough to pull off, given the French situation. And it did take me ten years to find a solution.

Sylvère Lotringer is professor of French at Columbia University in New York.