

# Jean Baudrillard and the Challenge of Photography

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## **Abstract**

In the discourses on photography, especially in the Anglo-American context, Jean Baudrillard has been regarded as the prophet of postmodern ‘hyperreality.’ This article argues for a different view of Baudrillard. By positioning his writings within historical, economic and social realities of the 1970s-1980s France, I argue that his legacy as a theorist and a practitioner of photography is best appraised with reference to his theory of simulacra and his lifelong preoccupation with objects—commodities, technological tools, artefacts, photographs. Considering Baudrillard’s theoretical appraisals of photography alongside his photographic practice, the article identifies a number of striking convergences between theory and practice, as well as important divergences, which are further clarified through a study of the photographic works of Baudrillard’s contemporaries, French artists Sophie Calle and the artist duo Pierre et Gilles.

## **Keywords**

Baudrillard, photography, Pierre et Gilles, Sophie Calle, object, simulacra

In the discourses on photography, and especially in the Anglo-American context, Jean Baudrillard is often presented as the prophet of “postmodern ‘hyperreality’” (Bordwell and Carroll 307), raising doubt over the very existence of objective reality that has been photography’s destiny to depict (Wells 75). This article presents a different view of

Baudrillard's relationship with photography. I argue that his legacy as a theorist and a practitioner of photography is best appraised with reference to his theory of simulacra and within the context of historical, economic and social realities of France of the 1970s-1980s that defined his lifelong preoccupation with objects. This reflection saturated his reflection on photography, which he defined as the tool of capturing "the primitive dimension of the object, as opposed to the secondary dimension of the subject and the whole domain of representation" (Baudrillard 33). The aim of the article then, is to contribute to the study of Baudrillard as a theorist and a practitioner of photography, which is an aspect of his work that is only beginning to be appraised in detail (Richon; Coulter; Smith). In the wider context, this article continues the project of authors such as Mike Gane ("Ironies of Postmodernism") and Kim Tofoletti who have argued for a continued significance of Baudrillard for contemporary visual phenomena including photography, which assures the French thinker's enduring 'topicality' (Latouche 18) and 'disturbing influence' (Penot-Lacassagne 15).

My argument is laid out in two parts. The first part offers a historically grounded exposition of Baudrillard's fascination with photography, by relating this interest to his studies of the effect of media and technology on social relations, sociology of consumerism and theorization of simulacra. Through such contextual approach, critical receptions of Baudrillard as a postmodern thinker are exposed as historical constructions. The second part of this paper is dedicated to the study of striking correspondences, as well as notable contradictions and contestations, that exist between Baudrillard's theoretical assumptions about photography and his photographic practice. Photographic works of Baudrillard's contemporaries, French artists Sophie Calle and the artist duo Pierre et Gilles, are identified in this part as offering especially rich juxtapositions with Baudrillard's ideas.

**Part 1.**

Baudrillard first became interested in photography in the 1980, dedicating a number of essays to an ontological inquiry into the nature of photography. These essays were published, with some delay, in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (1990), *The Perfect Crime* (1995) and *Impossible Exchange* (1999). By the time these essays appeared in print Baudrillard's ideas had already been adopted as the model for a postmodernist exposure of the photographic image as ontologically deceitful. In "Reinventing the Medium" (1999) Rosalind Krauss cited Baudrillard's discourse on simulacra as the proof that "the burgeoning of the copy not only facilitated the quotation of the original but splintered the supposed unity of the original 'itself' into nothing but a series of quotations" (290). As a result of this transformation, she argued, "photography had left behind its identity as a historical or an aesthetic object to become a theoretical object instead" (290). Such interpretations consolidated a view of Baudrillard as the thinker of the postmodern condition that was first promoted in the United States by Douglas Kellner in *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (1989). Such evaluations were made on the basis of translations published in Semiotext(e)'s Foreign Agents series, edited by Sylvère Lotringer (2003) that notably included *Simulations* (1981, translated into English in 1983) and *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or, the End of the Social and Other Essays* (1978, translated into English in 1983).

Baudrillard himself never used the term postmodernism in relation to his work, including in his writings on photography. In fact, Baudrillard kept equal distance from ideological underpinnings of both modernism and postmodernism (Gane, "Ironies of Postmodernism" 292). The critical reception of Baudrillard as a postmodernist in the Anglo-

American context, then, emerged as a result of a process that François Cusset described as the “‘de-nationalisation’ of concepts” that accompanied cultural transposition of “French theory” onto the American soil. In the process of this transposition, Cusset argued, ideas expounded by Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari acquired an American identity, having been retooled to respond to the specifics of the American cultural, intellectual and institutional context of the 1980s. The re-nationalisation of Baudrillard’s ideas, and specifically ideas concerning photography, proceeds in what follows through positioning them within the context of his lifelong preoccupation with objects—commodities, technological tools, artefacts.

Baudrillard’s preoccupation with objects dates back to his early studies of consumerism, which, crucially, were only made available in translation in the late 1990s. Thus, *The System of Objects* (1968) appeared in English in 1996 and *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1970) in 1998. His first publication, *The System of Objects*, was dedicated to the study of consumer objects on the basis of the Marxist critique of capitalism and a semiotic methodology that he studied at a seminar led by Roland Barthes at the EHESS (The School for Advanced Studies in the Social Studies in Paris) between 1964 and 1969. Baudrillard soon abandoned Marxist and semiotic frameworks underpinning this text, but his preoccupation with the immanent presence of the object originates in this early research of modern consumer society (Heilbrunn). In this society, the objects reign supreme: In *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard announced that “the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous stages, but by *objects*” (25). By the early 1980s, when *Fatal Strategies* appeared (1983, translated into English in 1990), the object has come to dominate the human subject completely.

The consumer society Baudrillard describes in these texts was based on a sociological analysis of the newly modernized France and was marked by the acceleration of the global integration of markets for goods and services, facilitated by technological innovations and supported by the further expansion of the European Union and international agreements to barrier-free trade. The Socialist government of François Mitterand, who held the presidency from 1981 to 1995, initially sought to control economic liberalization through nationalization of the banks and industrial enterprises. This commitment was soon withdrawn, and “whilst the state continued to possess a substantial capacity for intervention, multinational corporations, market forces and the imperative need to promote competitiveness in the developing global economy challenged its capacity for autonomous action” (Price 383-384). As a result, the state struggled to provide social support to safeguard the welfare of the citizens, while divisions between wealth categories increased dramatically since 1983 (Garbintia et al.). “Growth neither takes us further from, nor brings us closer to, affluence,” warned Baudrillard (*The Consumer Society* 53), arguing that poverty is structural to economic growth. His writings furthermore acquire a deeper historical meaning when considering the extent to which world economies had become reliant on speculative market transactions, as dramatically shown by the 1987 stock market crash. At a time when the economy was growing increasingly dependent on immaterial procedures in the form of electronic transfers, Baudrillard announced the emergence of the culture of simulacra, described in *Simulacra and Simulation* as objects and discourses which have no fixed relationship with the real world, characterized by absence of referent, substance and meaning (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 6).

Far from attesting to postmodern hyperreality, photography for Baudrillard counted among the phenomena capable of resisting the onset of simulacra. It is defined as a medium of

capturing “the primitive dimension of the object” (“The Ecstasy of Photography” 33).<sup>1</sup> As a technology that is based upon the principle of referentiality, photography could resist the retreat of historical authenticity and dematerialization, caused by technological advances and economic development (Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Photography” 43-44). Such attachment could be viewed as nostalgic (Willis 140), but Baudrillard’s affirmation of materiality of the photograph as “the trace left by the disappearance of everything else” (“Objects in This Mirror” 85) is entirely consistent with contemporary attitudes towards photography as an imprint, trace, index, or a phenomenological proof of the real. In her seminal collection of essays published in 1977, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag contended that “the consequences of lying have to be more central for photography than they ever can be for painting” (86). The year 1977 also marked the publication of “Notes on the Index,” where Rosalind Krauss borrowed the term index to designate the relationship between the photograph and its referent as one based on contiguity. Finally, in 1980, Roland Barthes presented perhaps the most enduring interpretation of the photograph’s bond with reality in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Contributions made by Barthes, Krauss and Sontag represent the foundational cornerstones of what will become photography theory as a new field of systematic research (Burgin).

Baudrillard was familiar with current ideas in this emerging field, stating, with reference to Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, that he was “in favour of ‘punctum’, in the sense of the singularity of the object at a given moment” (“The Ecstasy of Photography” 33). Significantly, Baudrillard made this statement with reference to this own photography. The philosopher

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<sup>1</sup> See Gane on the problematic idea of the “primitive” (*Jean Baudrillard: In Radical Uncertainty* 88-97).

began making photographs in the early 1980s and initially considered it a diversion and an alternative to writing (“Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg” 32). Far from being a mere diversion, photography played an important role in Baudrillard’s reflections on the medium and his wider critical project, since his practice and theoretical texts exist in a relationship of symbiosis. Olivier Richon observed that photography and writing for Baudrillard converge in a shared ambition “to analyse an object without interpreting it” (Richon 34), while for Gerry Coulter photographic practice led Baudrillard to “discover, without intending to, that photography can be theory” (Coulter 138). My interpretation of the interrelations between Baudrillard’s writings and his photography overlaps with Richard G. Smith’s view of Baudrillard’s photography as engaging with, rather than merely illustrating, his preoccupations with the subject/object relationship (Smith). Study of Baudrillard’s photographs makes it clear that he was fascinated with inanimate objects: architectural details, automobiles, urban landscapes, interiors, advertising billboards. In these photographs, the narcissistic object takes centre stage, reflecting Baudrillard’s view of photography as “the conduit of pure objectality” (“Radical Exoticism” 154).

A photograph that Baudrillard took on his visit to Lisbon in 1986 is representative of his fascination with ‘objectality’ (see fig. 1). It shows a wall-mounted advertising panel featuring the face of a woman, her head dreamily falling back, lips parted in a seductive smile. In photographing the panel, Baudrillard cropped out much of contextual information, but was careful to include a row of lights illuminating the panel and electric fans mounted onto its surface. Crude intrusions into the illusory space of the advertisement act as a reminder of the manufactured nature of fantasy of unattainable perfection promoted by advertising. Within Baudrillard’s categorization of objects in *The Consumer Society*, the human (female) body

becomes itself a consumer object, the “finest consumer object” because of the great share of disposable income that is lavished on its upkeep and embellishment (129). The Lisbon photograph, when placed within this context, is revealing of profound anxieties in a society where excess and frenetic consumption is concealed behind a veneer of luxury and glamour. The gesture of re-photographing an image that was originally based on a photograph, furthermore, draws attention to the role of photography in the consumer society. Its role, as Christopher Phillips noted, was immense, as photography actively participated in creating the culture of simulacra “as the principal source of mass imagery that ceaselessly circulates throughout the global *société de consommation* (consumer society) (Phillips 14).



Fig. 1. Jean Baudrillard, *Untitled (Lisbon)* (1986). Chromogenic photograph, 24 x 36 cm. Courtesy of Marine Baudrillard



As this analysis demonstrates, Baudrillard's photographic practice extended and refined his theoretical perspectives on photography. Attachment to the principle of referentiality and nostalgic recuperation in Baudrillard's writings converged with a sense of anxiety when faced with a dematerialized reality of consumer society, communicated in his photographs. But the challenge of photography lies in its capacity to confront theoretical assumptions about the medium. One assumption concerns the status of the photograph as "the conduit of pure objectivity," that expressed a conviction, strongly held, that the photographic act reduces the subject to the function of a camera ("Radical Exoticism" 154). Baudrillard's photography contradicts this appraisal. The Lisbon photograph bears distinct markers of subjective decisions, evident in the use of dramatic lighting, lush colour and careful composition. These formal qualities endow Baudrillard's photographs with a considerable aesthetic appeal that their author claimed was entirely unintended (Baudrillard quoted in Zurbrugg 3). Baudrillard repeatedly denied photography's claims to artistic expression ("The Ecstasy of Photography" 33), which nevertheless did not stop him from displaying his photography on the walls of the museums of art (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*; Baudrillard and Weibel; Baudrillard and Heinrich).

Such contradictory attitudes were in fact symptomatic of the intense polemic surrounding photography's struggle for institutional validation as art in the 1980s in France. This decade has been pivotal in bringing a resolution to these debates as photography, saw its status evolve from a "middle-brow art" (Bourdieu) to a medium confident of its place on the wall of an art museum (Morel; Poivert, *50 ans de photographie française*). Questions concerning photography's identity as a medium emerged in art practices amidst attempts to validate photograph's status as evidence in scholarly discourses. As this has been noted above,

this was the time when photographic representation was theorized as the index or a phenomenological trace of the real. But the 1980s was also the decade when Baudrillard's "order of simulacra" was linked to photography as the main source of mass-produced images. The joint emergence of theories insisting on the supposedly intransient bond between the photograph and reality and those denying the very existence of reality cannot be a matter of mere coincidence. It should be regarded as a symptom, a manifestation of anxiety concerning the state of the real. In what follows, I address the nature of this anxiety, through an analysis of the works of Pierre et Gilles and Sophie Calle.

## **Part 2.**

The work of artist duo Pierre et Gilles is habitually dismissed as inconsequential in its "shameless celebration of pop culture" and uncritical embrace of "fashion aesthetic based on exaggeration, seduction, and stylisation" (Attias). Here, a comparison can be drawn with Baudrillard's controversial standing due to his "hyperbolic and declarative, often lacking sustained, systematic analysis' style of writing" (Poster 8). The stylised, exaggerated aesthetic of Pierre et Gilles belongs to the genre of staged photography that emerged simultaneously across Europe and USA in the late 1970s to become one of the dominant practices of the 1980s. This genre is defined as concerned with "constructed realities" rather than a direct representation of reality (Köhler et al.) and privileges the camera as the ultimate point of the orientation of the staged event. Pierre et Gilles's *Gai Paris, Jean-Paul and Andréas* (1988) is representative of the elaborate staging process that is based on a predetermined scenography comprising of sets and props and involves orchestration of models, lighting, costume, and makeup. The models pose in front of a stage set created in the artists' studio comprising of a painted background of pale blue sky, with garlands of pink blooms framing the image. A

replica of the Eiffel Tower completes the compositional theme of “gai Paris” with its Belle Epoque connotations of frivolity, decadence and libertinage. Rose-pink and powder-blue colours combine with the blush tones of the white models’ skin to produce a palette of airy, effervescent colors that contribute to a mood of carefree reverie. Two semi-naked youths, while being at the centre of the composition, blend into décor like another element of this dream universe. The pairing of a blond and a brunet recreates the stereotypical opposition in popular culture, but it also refers, in a self-reflexive gesture, to artists themselves. The real-life and creative partnership of (blond) Gilles Blanchard and (dark-haired) Pierre Comroy (Pierre et Gilles, *Autobiographie en photomatons*) has been the subject of numerous double self-portraits that draw on ultra-kitsch gay erotic fiction as well as referencing strategies of self-mythologization in art.

Pierre et Gilles’s models are often drawn from the glamorous world of fashion, cinema, art and celebrity; the sitters have included Madonna, Serge Gainsbourg, Isabelle Huppert, Marc Jacobs and Conchita Wurst, among others. With the help of costumes, make-up, props and décor, as they pass through the “factory of idols” of Pierre et Gilles, the sitters are transformed into an idealised, fantasy version of themselves (Pierre et Gilles, *La Fabrique des idoles*). Their portraits, taken by Pierre and printed on canvas-backed support, are further embellished through manual retouching and re-painting by Gilles. “Being photographed by Pierre et Gilles,” contended Michel Poivert, “is tantamount to gaining access to the portrait gallery of carnival kings and queens: placing the emblems of one’s stardom into the hands of artists [...] to be converted into their own vocabulary” (“The Vernacular Image” 45). While it true that “conversion” is transformative, I would suggest that attributes of stardom are transferred rather than surrendered, bestowing on the finished work the appeal of a celebrity name. The end

product is a blend that combines the emblematic attributes of the sitter with over-the-top embellishment, camp exuberance and wide-eyed idealism that has become the trademark style of Pierre et Gilles.

Like Baudrillard's simulacra, Pierre and Gilles's photographs have no stable point of origin in the real world. They originate in mass media and popular culture: the myth of the perfect body, created by cinema and advertising, the cult of the celebrity that is one of the enduring obsessions of the Western cultures, the obsession with youth. These tropes, drawn from representations and media events, are further overlaid with an eclectic mix of cultural clichés and romantic tropes, a wide range of religious motifs, and a heavy dose of camp. These images engage with the culture of simulacra by doubling its arbitrary, superficial and immaterial nature with images correspondingly depthless, whimsical and exalted. But in throwing back the image of high-gloss artifice Pierre et Gilles do not pretend to stand outside the pervasive influence of mass media. Indeed, the artists seem to be under the spell of the same seductive strategies of mediatization that they highlight as the defining feature of contemporary culture in consumer society. In this regard, their practice resonates with Baudrillard's hypothesis that, despite their "hyperreal" and immaterial nature, media events have profoundly real effects on those who experience them (*Simulacra and Simulation* 21).

The work of French artist Sophie Calle may seem initially very different from high-gloss drama of Pierre et Gilles, but it is similarly underpinned by a search for authenticity behind artifice. The encounter with the work of Sophie Calle was a vital catalyst for Baudrillard's engagement with photography, and he returned to her practice repeatedly in a series of essays written between 1983 and 1993 (Baudrillard, "Please Follow Me"; Baudrillard, "The Gray Imminence"; Baudrillard, "Pursuit in Venice"). The artist, for her part, appreciated

Baudrillard's support at the crucial early stage of her career, which gave her work visibility through an association with his name (Calle, "Lettre"). The relationship between Baudrillard and Calle may be considered a prime example of mutually enriching interchanges between art and thought in contemporary France that has long been the subject of critical attention (Wilson; Trifonova). But their relationship is also representative of Baudrillard's inattentiveness to the visual language of art, and a failure to meet the challenge of photography.

Baudrillard's analysis of Calle's *Venetian Suite* (*Suite vénitienne*) is a case in point. This project documents, through black and white photographs and documentary material, Calle's journey to Venice, undertaken with the aim of following a man whom she previously briefly met. The project is based on a method that has become a distinguishing feature of Calle's artistic practice, which consists of setting up a situation in a real-life context, which is then allowed to develop organically. The outcomes of such experiments are then recorded, through photography and text, and typically presented in installations combining text and image, as well as carefully produced artist's books. In his reflection on *Venetian Suite*, Baudrillard perceives the act of stalking a man who is barely known to the artist as fundamentally devoid of intention and meaning, and as such, characteristic of the interplay of simulacra as objects with no fixed relationship to reality. This discussion presents Baudrillard with an opportunity to expound his theory of radical otherness (*altérité radicale*), whereby Calle's effacing her own subjectivity in the act of following is interpreted as indicative of a collapse of the perspectival space between the observer and the observed (Baudrillard, "Facticité et séduction" 129-165).

But *Venetian Suite*, for all its apparent meaninglessness, is deeply marked by Calle's passionate involvement with the subject of her chase, identified as Henri B (Calle, "Suite vénitienne"). This involvement is undiminished by the fact that she barely knows the man; if anything, the mystery seems to create a blank screen onto which Calle is free to project her fantasies of a romantic attachment and erotic passion. The work may be based on fiction, a fabricated scenario, but it is revealing of the extent to which everyday reality is rooted on narrative, fantasy and fiction, as the basis for relationships, one's personal identity and life choices. As Iwona Blazwick perceptively noted, "behind the artifice of the mask and the arbitrary structure of an intrusion, lies the messy emotional truth of loss, disappointment, or frustrated expectation. The catalyst of and consequence of many of [Calle's] investigations is failure. Yet her unswerving application to following the rules of her own protocols and the remarkable responses that elicits from her protagonists, suggest what should be necessary, ethical conditions of social life" (Blazwick 15). The themes of reality, surveillance, social relations and intimacy continue to dominate Calle's distinctive practice, as can be seen from recent project *Because* (2018), a project that focused on narratives that lie hidden behind photographic representations.

Photographic work of Pierre et Gilles, Calle and Baudrillard himself is revealing of the extent to which materialism and illusion, real actions and media events are fused in a culture defined by enduring fascination with "the spectacle" (Debord). These ideas were developed in Baudrillard's seminal theories of simulacra, and relate to his wider project dedicated to the study of the object that goes back to his research into the effects of consumerism, media and technology on social relations in the post-industrial society. Considered within this historical, intellectual and artistic context, as well as within the history of institutional validation of

photography in France, Baudrillard's relationship with photography emerges as ambiguous, contradictory and enduring. A desire to identify phenomena that will be able to resist the onset of simulacra makes Baudrillard, in the eyes of Rex Butler, "a thinker not at all of reality as simulacrum, but of a possibility of reality when all is simulacra" (64). As a medium that has always been embroiled with thinking about our relationship with the real, photography provided Baudrillard with means of confronting anxiety over apparent erosion of the formerly stable constants and dematerialization of reality.

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