



## **The illusion fulfilled at the end of the world**

**By Raquel Paiva**

People are terrified and locked inside. Social activities and work are carried out solely online. The world is fighting for vaccines. Buildings, bars, and restaurants are closed; risk is ever-present and the nearby human being, the "other", is potential contamination. All of the work to construct a civilization carried out since the Industrial Revolution, the symbols of an entire era, immersed in contamination and uncertainty. The current situation is without a doubt the fulfillment of all of Baudrillard's "prophecies," those which many philosophers, sociologists, and economists of his time turned their nose at, seeing them as mere post-modernist rhetoric.

The impact of all this has, in a way, inspired the days-long struggle I have faced in trying to write this text. The reality has become more real than any theory or reflection. Baudrillard saw the signs, he worked with them, like an indigenous tribesman combing through the woods, attentive to the slightest detail, collecting traces and remains. He saw them in the beginning of the 1970s, in "Symbolic Exchange and Death," in foreseeing the catastrophe. Many of his contemporaries saw him as a pessimist. Today we may call him prescient.

After all, in this work, he wrote "a natural catastrophe is a threat to the established order, not only the disorder it provokes, but also for the blow it strikes to all sovereign rationality" (1976, p. 247). He never stopped reflecting on this idea, not since his first book, "The System of Objects," actually his doctoral thesis, presented to a committee which included Barthes and Bourdieu. The theme of catastrophe unfolds along the course of his work and assumes its definitive form in his photography.

On the other hand, many recognize the Nietzschean side of Baudrillard as the more potent one. We should perhaps explore this side and investigate how deeply the German philosopher penetrated his thought. This will allow for some speculation on the manner in which he addresses hope, despite his focus on catastrophe and disenchantment, which could be seen, for example, in the phrase "in every complaint there is a subtle dose of revenge" (Nietzsche, 1985, p. 107).

Here, it is worth reflecting a bit on the presence of the individual beyond his work in order to research the nuances of a desire to revert an imminent end. One long personal relationship specifically ought to be considered.

### **Paintings on the wall**

"Fetishists" - that is what Baudrillard called myself and my partner when we asked him to sign framed photos of his *Cool Memories* manuscript. It was around 11:00am on a winter's day, and we were in the living room of his apartment on Rua Sainte-Beuve in Montparnasse. We drank the champagne he had brought before putting the photo in a case. We asked him to sign the photo, as he had years before with another photo of mannequins in a storefront. He took the pen and, smiling, said "A lovely pair of fetishists..."

On the wall of the living room in Rio de Janeiro, there hang two large photos, framed, with Jean Baudrillard's signature. Different dates. The first, of mannequins in a storefront, marked the beginning of his photographic work, when he had only a small Japanese camera, given to him as a present. The second, the *Cool Memories* manuscript lying open on a table, presumably in a Parisian café, is from when he was already showing his photos, taken with a professional camera, in galleries and museums.

Thus, two framed photographs. The "Mannequins" image pleased us greatly, although the author did not care as much for it. Showing him how much we liked it was enough for him to offer us the photo, frame and all. As the trip was far from over, he stored our

present underneath the bed. At the end of the trip, however, we did not come back to Paris. So one year later, we reunited with our friend, and the photo was still where we left it, untouched, and we brought it home. The photo of the manuscript on the table, which came much later, was selected among various others he offered us on our last visit to his apartment on Rue Sainte-Beuve.

How is this little story relevant?

First, the mannequin introduces our theme, recurrent in Baudrillard's work, of the object which interrogates the subject, despite its irreducible alterity, its radical indifference. At the end of the 1970s, he affirmed that "for the system of the political economy of the sign, the reference model of the body is the *mannequin* (in all its variations). Contemporary of the robot (the ideal pair in the science fiction: Barbarella), the mannequin represents a body fully functionalized under the law of value, but this time as the place for production of the value/*sign*. What is produced is no longer the labor power, but rather models of signification - not only sexual models of fulfillment, but *sexuality itself as a model*" (1976, p. 177).

Whether robot ("functional liberation of the body as labor power") or mannequin, the body - despite supporting the hopes of liberating primary processes under the sign of sexual revolution and proclaiming the unconscious as History's subject - is nothing more than a set of signification models constructed by different systems. Baudrillard's critique is aimed as much at psychoanalysis as at the media. To understand the full range of this critique, it is important to remember the context of the 1960s and 70s, when psychoanalytic discourse had won over the public sphere with suggestions to transform drives into a libertarian movement.

Choosing to tell a little story from a long personal relationship, particularly one including my partner, with whom he maintained a 30-year friendship, goes along well with Jean Baudrillard's spirit. While he sought to identify subject and object in photography, in

thought, he made no radical distinction between theory and a certain fiction, which allows for cases and stories. In other words, he never established that rigid, positivist separation between fact and discourse. The world he redescribed could sometimes appear as an ironic effect of fictional rhetoric; the concept could be implied by telling a little story.

It is true that Baudrillard, in his well-known aversion to academic discourse, did not claim any specific method or appeal to epistemological categories. He preferred to reflect on appearances, understood as necessary natural illusions. He understood appearances contain vestiges of truth which can be shared through discourse. This does not mean, however, that he lacked an analytical method. Invention or creation has in fact been used in the most intuitive analyses which have shifted the dominant systems of thought, leading to an implosion in traditional, Aristotelian ontology. For example, there is no single explicative structure for communication's diverse phenomena, which requires us to test the explicative capacity of a theory from various angles.

There is more than one name, or origin, for this kind of invention. There are multiple perspectives, and therefore each one must be defined by whoever formulates it. Baudrillard was an undeniably fecund source of ideas, many of which were ahead of their time, nearly prophetic. Maybe, however, to the epistemological eye, Baudrillard's invention lies in the realm of *paradigms*, and can be identified by words which Baudrillard himself deemed *mots de passe*, or passwords. This does not escape hermeneutic spirit, for which knowledge of the singular supposes knowledge of the whole. It is not a hermeneutic which intend to assure some "truth" about the world, but rather has a Nietzschean tilt, which aesthetically legitimizes existence, fostering communion of form as knowledge, as in a work of art. Constantly inspired by Nietzsche, Baudrillard's idea-paradigms tend to converge on post-humanity (as distinct from the Übermensch, of course), which develops into this intangible zone of shadows called "communication," and which is generally tangential to the subject-object condition.

*Mannequin*, therefore, is a paradigmatic figure for the brilliant interpretation of a set of phenomena tied to the deception of mass society's bet on excessive, collective pleasure. Happiness as finality, preached by technology and the media, would be "allowing drives which were formerly blocked by mental concepts (taboo, superego, guilt) crystallize into objects, concrete instances where the explosive force of desire is abolished and the repressive, ritual function of social order materializes" (Baudrillard, 1967, p. 20).

This radical suspicion of reality is the touchstone of his thought. He did not consider things to be inexistent or unreal, but rather he saw that the classical principle of reality had reached an end. Everything we called real, thanks to metaphysical representation, was simultaneously abolished and shifted to a supposed *hyperreality*. This is a kind of "starting point" of feeling, of the imaginary, and of illusion. Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God is completed with the death of reality and, together with it, all the metaphysical and universalist discourse from old Europe.

On the wall of the living room, the photographed mannequins in the storefront display their indifferent, glacial nudity, somehow interrogating the desertification of their own emotions. The lack of clothes compels the eyes to hover on their plastic skin; skin without warmth, smell, hair, the skin of sexually ambiguous replicas, suggesting the vitrification of difference, the neutralization of life drives. In the photo's background, reflected in the storefront glass, one sees the photographer in the act of capturing the image: Jean Baudrillard unfolding in an image.

The other photo on the living room wall - the photo of one of the manuscripts of *Cool Memories* - recalls the ever present narrative of attitude and posture in Baudrillard's life and work. *Cool Memories* is Baudrillard's literature, which is not limited to poetry, lyrics, or even a small performance. Taking a photograph of the *Cool Memories* manuscript on a table, pen lying beside it, Jean Baudrillard somehow photographed himself, or his ironic condition as a subject in a world made of objects. On the living room wall, the

mannequins and the manuscript are quite photogenic. As Jean Baudrillard says: "Only the inhuman is photogenic."

### **End of the World**

When I met Baudrillard, the 1980s were heading towards their end. Brazil was soon to thrive, as it left the shadows of a dictatorship which had shackled journalism and media in general. My first contact with his writing already struck me. His influence at the time was so strong that it left its mark on one of the most iconic films of an era, one which foresaw our current reality: *The Matrix*, by the Wachowski sisters. It is still impossible to pick a favorite book among his copious, fluid *oeuvre*, and even a year after his death in 2007, two more books were published.

This is why I have opted to reflect on the premonitory aspect of his work and argue that the global COVID-19 pandemic is the consolidation of the "perfect crime," as he defined the elimination of the real world and all its traces, in which we are simultaneously criminals and victims.

On the other hand, confined as we are, "we are *hospitalized* by society, taken hostage. Neither life nor death: thus is safety, thus paradoxically is also the statute of the hostage" (1984, p. 36); continuously watching the "banalization of the world through information and universal communication" (2004, p. 60), a process which has been accelerating for decades. Through these thoughts, which I have chosen randomly, I intend to prove the unequivocal, ongoing relevance of Baudrillard's work.

If forced to choose, *The Illusion of the End* (1992) would certainly be considered for various reasons. Firstly, due to the fact that he laboriously dissected our current reality 20 years ago; but also because the books are supported by pataphysics in which one can perhaps carve out a few hypotheses. In the end, "management of the end is thus management of catastrophes. It is specifically this catastrophe which represents the slow extermination at the end of the world" (1992, p. 99).

In the Southern Hemisphere, this "end of the world" inspired the Brazilian indigenous leader of the Krenak, Ailton Krenak, one of the most influential modern thinkers, to write his celebrated *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World* (2019). He was inspired not only by the idea of an imminent end, which no longer applied solely to Brazilian indigenous peoples who have been violently subjugated in an increasingly predatory capitalist worldview for 500 years, but by an imminent end of the planet as a whole.

Ailton Krenak avoids a purely apocalyptic discourse. On the contrary, he shows how indigenous peoples become part of their territory, with a dependence on and harmony with the surrounding universe; where rivers, sky and forest become a part of subjectivity. The alternative spectrum of this conception of the universe is expressed in everyday situations, such as the moment an indigenous person has a long conversation with a stone which he considers to be his friend and which lies near his residence.

This recognition of objects and their autonomous existence implies forms of reflection and experience which is apparently distinct from that defined by Baudrillard in *The System of Objects* (1968). Both authors address the mythical object, which for Krenak maintains its magical aspect while, for Baudrillard, was emptied of all meaning. For both authors, however, the certainty that a relationship exists between the inanimate and the individual portrays the boldness of the human experience in its purest form.

Comparing Krenak and Baudrillard means assuming that the end of the world has likely arrived, and not just because of the pandemic. The end may have come little by little, slowly. The "ideas to postpone the end of the world" brought forth by someone who experiences nature as a whole is the materialization of a narrative present in both authors. Alongside the images of hyperreality, we have the option of following the signals of the indigenous Brazilian author: "My provocation to postpone the end of the world is precisely the capacity to always tell a new story. If we can do this, we will postpone the end" (Krenak, 2019, p. 13).

Baudrillard, on the other hand, in his prescient narrative on the possibility of managing a catastrophe, sketches a potential end scenario:

The artificial catastrophe, as well as the beneficial aspects of civilization, progress much faster than the natural catastrophe. The underdeveloped are still in the initial stage of natural, unpredictable catastrophe. We are already on the second, that of the manufactured catastrophe -- imminent and predictable. We will quickly arrive at the third kind of catastrophe, the pre-programmed catastrophe - deliberate and experimental. And we will get there searching for the means to escape natural catastrophe, to escape the unpredictable nature of our fate. In his incapacity to escape this fate, man will pretend to be its author. In not accepting confrontation with any fatal, uncertain term, he will prefer to stage his own death as a species.

(Baudrillard, 1992, p. 105)

### **The End**

"*Les Manequins*" and "*Cool Memories*" are the only pictures in the living room. These days in confinement, they jump from the wall as though revealing what was always in front of our eyes. After one year of the pandemic, now tired of this same confined landscape, the motionless mannequins in a storefront serve as a fateful prophecy, with a power different from Dorian Gray's picture. We are not becoming younger under the gaze of a portrait which absorbs the passage of time. We are, rather, little by little, becoming as motionless as the mannequins, but still hopeful and capable of writing our narratives, our manuscripts. This narrative reminds us of the last stanza of Carlos Drummond de Andrade's poem, "Poema de Necessidade", so as to urgently commemorate our favorite friends and authors and continue on the path, while remaining attentive to the signals:

É preciso viver com os homens  
 é preciso não assassiná-los,  
 é preciso ter mãos pálidas  
 e anunciar O FIM DO MUNDO.

Les auteur.e.s prennent la responsabilité de leur texte  
 All authors take responsibility for their publication



(Andrade, 2012, p.15)

[It is necessary to live with men  
it is necessary not to kill them,  
it is necessary to have pallid hands  
and announce THE END OF THE WORLD.

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