

The Ecstasy of Communication. Critical remarks on Jean Baudrillard

ABSTRACT

The socio-cultural criticism of Jean Baudrillard (born 1929), spans from the political turmoil of France in the late-1960s, to the mediatised world of the 1990s and early 21st century.¹ In this process his provocative work on the socio-political role of signs, symbolic exchange, simulation, and hyperreality has important implications for communication studies – and more specifically communication theory. The point is that with the “... greater mediatization of society ... we are witnessing the virtualization of our world.”² This contribution briefly reconstructs, firstly, two phases in Baudrillard’s intellectual career – phases that shifted from an early neo-Marxist critique of the modern consumer society to a post-Marxist or postmodern view of society (which include engagements with socio-anthropology; psychoanalysis, sociology, semiology and media theory), and eventually ends in a kind of anti-theory with an extreme fatal vision of the world.³ In section 2 the implications of these two shifts in Baudrillard’s intellectual career are contextualized in the field of media and communication studies – and specifically his concept of the “ecstasy of communication”. Finally (in Section 3) some critical remarks are made on Baudrillard’s fascinating, but problematic, project.

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¹ This article was originally presented as a paper in the Department of Communication (RAU) in March 2003 and at the annual SACOMM conference in Durban, September 2003.

² See the cover of Baudrillard (2003a).

³ These two phases takes its cue from Gane’s (2000: xvi-xxii) five phases: 1) *The First Phase: Marxism and Semiotics*. 2) *The phase of Transition: The Critique of Marxism*. 3) *The Second Phase*. 4) *The Third Phase: From Critical to Fatal Theory*. 5) *The Fourth Phase: The Fourth Order of Simulacra*.

1. BAUDRILLARD'S INTELLECTUAL TRAJECTORY

1.1 First phase: Critique of Marxism and the consumer society

The early phase of Baudrillard's career is influenced by Sartre's existential Marxism (theoretically) and the Algerian War (politically) (Gane 2000: xvii). Baudrillard also linked his interest in Existential or phenomenological Marxism (Sartre) with the structural-semiotic Marxism of Barthes. At this point the work of Henri Lefebvre, on everyday life, and Herbert Marcuse, on the one-dimensional consumer society, also became important. One of the central aspects of the young Baudrillard's reception of existentialism, Marxism, and Saussurian semiology was that the classical Marxist critique of political economy needed to be supplemented by a sign theory (semiology). In this sense there is a remarkable affinity between the work of the early Baudrillard and Habermas's formulation of the importance of *labor* (work) and communicative interaction in his study of 1968, *Knowledge and Interests*.⁴

In Baudrillard's first three works, published between 1968 and 1972, he refers in political-economical terms to a shift from an early stage of competitive market capitalism to a stage of monopoly capitalism (1900 to the 1960s). This shift contributed to an increase in the management and steering of consumption.⁵ Baudrillard also describes this shift, in a socio-critical manner, as a move from production-oriented capitalism to a consumption-driven capitalism. In this process he makes an important distinction between (material) *use-value* and (symbolic) *sign-value*. The argument is that in contemporary societies, commodities can not merely be interpreted through their use and exchange value (Marx's classical theory of the commodity), but also through their sign-value – the latter becomes an increasingly important part of contemporary consumption-driven capitalism. In other words commodities are not just bought and displayed for their use-value, but also for their sign-value. The phenomenon of sign-value is thus an essential constituent of the commodity in a consumer society. It is clearly expressed through the proliferation of commodities that are advertised, packaged, and displayed in a society, where the mass media and culture are characterised by signs and spectacles (Kellner 2000: 52-53). In contemporary jargon one could say that *branding* is becoming more important than the product. Against this background, Baudrillard proposes, in the last of his early works, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), three tasks for social theorising: *firstly*, it must criticise use-value; *secondly*, apart from a critical theory of exchange-value, a critical theory of use-value, signifier and signified should be added; and *thirdly*, there is a need for a theory of symbolic exchange (Baudrillard 1981: 128-129). It is especially this latter aspect that became dominant in the next phase of Baudrillard's career.

1.2 Second phase: symbolic exchange, postmodernism, and fatal theory

In this phase of Baudrillard's career, which is generally applicable to his work from the second half of the 1970s to the present, his critical work on Marxism is supplemented with a theory of symbolic exchange. In his work *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, for example, the whole debate on use-value and sign-value is shifted to the terrain of symbolic exchange (Baudrillard 1993). In this process

⁴ With regard to Habermas, see his essay on Marxism (1974) and his work on labor and interaction (Habermas 1972). On Baudrillard and Habermas, see Poster (2000).

⁵ See Baudrillard (1996, 1998, and 1981).

the theory of sign-value becomes part of a theory of symbolic exchange and *simulacra*. At the same time new theoretical influences, such as socio-anthropology (Durkheim, Mauss, and Bataille), psychoanalysis (Freud and Lacan), media theory (McLuhan), Nietzsche, and Foucault, became important. Amongst these influences Baudrillard (1993: 155) took Bataille's anthropological analysis of phenomena such as "excess, ambivalence, the gift, sacrifice, expenditure, and paroxysm" seriously. Against this background he also made a few critical reversals: consumption over production, symbol over sign, and cyclical over linear time (Gane 2000: xx). In the latter part of the 1970s his newfound position was applied in different contexts (that will be further discussed): virtuality/reality; personal identity, epistemology; power; sexuality; the media (Chang 2000; Chen 2000); art, and the death of the social and political (Gane 2000: xix, xxi).

In his second phase, Baudrillard provides an image of a techno-mediatised society where individuals and groups are caught up in a delirium of images, spectacles, simulations and communications networks that have less and less relationship to an outside and external reality. This shift from a concept of sign-value to symbolic exchange, or the circulation of symbols and images, has the implication that the very concepts of the social, the political, or even of "reality" no longer seem to have any meaning. In this process an ever-present "media saturated consciousness" is in such a state of "mesmerized fascination" (*ecstasy*) that the notion of meaning itself (which depends on a reasonable, stable world and shared consensus) becomes problematic (Kellner 2000: 53). In other words, Baudrillard argues "... that we are witnessing the virtualization of our world, a disappearance of reality itself and perhaps the impossibility of any exchange at all (Baudrillard 2003b, backcover). Poster (1998) aptly describes this situation as one where people consume "...not so much objects but images, ideals, fantasies, styles -- all of which are structured through advertising and presented in the electronic media, a strange new dimension of social life which altered forever the older 'bourgeois' culture of modern society." Poster further says that in contemporary shopping centres and malls, in radio and TV advertisements a culture comes about that captures "... the attention and the imagination not only of the masses in the industrialized societies but in the Communist societies of Eastern Europe and in much of the 'Third World' as well." The interesting issue here is: What happens to the identity formation of individuals and masses under such circumstances? In many ways Baudrillard (2003b, backcover) downplays the position of the subject and crosses over to the standpoint of the object. In this context the following aspects can be mentioned: "... a refusal of the fetishisation of being over appearance, of causes over phenomena, and of motives over the immobility of things".

In the previous paragraph all the main motives of Baudrillard's social theory were presented. One salient point is that his postmodern social theory has a clear epistemological side where the production and proliferation of signs, have created a society of *simulations* governed by *implosion* and *hyperreality* – a situation of *radical semiurgy*.⁶ This is all about the end of the era of production and the advent of the new era of simulations. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* he even announces the end of political economy and thus the end of the Marxist problematic – the end of labour. Baudrillard (1993: 8) writes: "The end of the signifier/signified dialectic which facilitated the accumulation of knowledge and of meaning, the linear syntagma of cumulative discourse. And at

⁶ Baudrillard is uncomfortable with the label postmodernism. This, though, does not imply that others may take Baudrillard's work to be paradigmatically postmodern (Gane 2000: xxi).

the same time, the end of the exchange-value/use-value dialectic which is the only thing that makes accumulation and social production possible. The end of the linear dimension of the commodity. The end of the classic era of the sign. The end of the era of production.”

It is interesting that from the late-1970s to the present Baudrillard's work on symbolic exchange moved in a cultural-pessimistic direction. In works such as *Seduction* (1979), *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) and *Fatal Strategies* (1990b) the notion of symbolic exchange is radicalised. While his idea of fatal theory found only a muted reception, it was his provocative positions in *Seduction* that created a substantial response and debate. According to Gane (2000: xxi) “... Baudrillard's evocation and defense of the feminine principle of seduction was almost universally condemned as a backlash position, a sophisticated defense of patriarchy. However, the theoretical shift involved in *Seduction*, a move from an acceptance of the ‘passivity’ of the object, to one where the object takes the initiative, was in many ways a decisive turning point in Baudrillard's work. These essays also introduced the concept of ‘transpolitical’ forms; that is, those new forms which had emerged not dialectically through opposition and sublation, but through hybridisation and merging (transgenetic, transsexual, for example)”. The last two and a half decades of Baudrillard's writing (on the virtual, object, symbolic exchange, America, science fiction, war, terrorism, 9/11, AIDS) can be read as an attempt to think through the implications of the work in the second phase of his career and, if possible, to find a way out -- although he eventually concludes that there is no way out (Kellner 2000: 53; Baudrillard 1988, 1990b, 1995, 2002a, 2002b). To summarise: the principle at issue here is not only the primacy of consumption over production or of the sign over the commodity, but as previously indicated, the object over the subject. With this last change of position, Baudrillard actually attempts to undermine the whole analysis of the radical processes at work in contemporary Western societies. This position of radical social and epistemic undermining will now be contextualised with reference to the world of the media and communication.

2. BAUDRILLARD'S CONCEPT OF THE MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

What are the implications of the mentioned two phases in Baudrillard's intellectual career for his concept of the media and communication? In a critical essay on Marxist media theory in *Toward a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981), Baudrillard argues that Marxism's economic reductionism or “productivism” makes it difficult to conceptualise language, signs, and communication.⁷ In criticising Enzensberger's media theory, Baudrillard provocatively refers to the non-communication of the mass media.⁸ At the same time he makes the distinction between a modern universe of production, on the one hand, and the accelerating role of contemporary media in a postmodern society of *simulations*, on the other. As indicated (in Section 1.1.) modernity is the era of production characterized by the rise of industrial capitalism and the hegemony of the bourgeoisie while postmodern society (Section 1.2.) is an era of simulation dominated by signs, codes, and models. Modernity emphasises the production of things – commodities, objects, and products – while

⁷ Baudrillard (1981: 164) writes: “McLuhan has said, with his usual Canadian-Texan brutality, that Marx, the spiritual contemporary of the steam engine and railroads, was already obsolete in his lifetime with the appearance of the telegraph. In his candid fashion, he is saying that Marx, in his materialist analysis of production, had virtually circumscribed productive forces as a privileged domain from which language, signs and communication in general found themselves excluded.”

postmodernity, is characterised by a proliferation of signs (radical semiurgy). Baudrillard's follows here in the footsteps of McLuhan's (1984). For McLuhan modernity is an exploding process of commodification, mechanisation, technology, and market relations, while postmodern society is the site of an implosion of all boundaries, regions, and distinctions between high and low culture, appearance and reality, and just about every other binary opposition maintained by traditional philosophy and social theory. In the last phase of Baudrillard's career the new era of simulation has been sketched as one where "... social reproduction (information processing, socialization and knowledge industries, media, cybernetic control models, etc.) replaces production as the organizing principle of society." Even labour is no longer a force of production, but merely a sign among signs (Kellner 2000: 53). This is especially the case with labour wages, which do not relate to one's production, "... but rather signify that one is playing the game and fitting into the system; and money is a 'cool medium' which allows participation and involvement in the system ..." – a globalising system of "floating" speculative capital. It has been indicated that in such a context political economy is no more the structural bedrock on which phenomena can be interpreted. In the place of political economy, "... comes a *hyper-reality* of simulations in which images, spectacles, and the play of signs replace the logic of production and class conflict as key constituents of contemporary capitalist societies" Similar to *labor*, even one's physical body (including sexuality) are not productive forces, but "chess pieces", that are mobilised into social institutions and practices (Kellner 2000: 54).

The question now is: What happens to the media under these circumstances? According to this logic, the media is interpreted as key simulation machines that reproduce images, signs, and codes constituting an autonomous realm of *hyperreality*, which play a key role in the obliteration of the social in everyday life. It is an era where movie actors simulate politics (the classical example here is Reagan) and TV evangelicals simulate TV-religion (think of Billy Graham). In this postmodern and hyperreal mediascape of simulation, the boundaries between information and entertainment, images and politics implode. Here TV news and documentary programs increasingly assume the form of entertainment (infotainment), using dramatic and melodramatic codes to frame their stories (Kellner 2000: 55). In previous eras, the media were believed to mirror, reflect, or represent reality, whereas the media now constitute a new reality (*hyperreality*). "As people spent more and more time with electronic communications (tuned into the radio, glued to TVs, jacked into computers, turned on to walkmen and ghetto blasters, conversing on telephones, sending faxes, receiving e-mail), more time exchanging symbols through the mediation of increasingly smart machines, the world of face-to-face was becoming the world of the interface." Symbolic constructions are no longer rooted in an original reference such as a spoken conversation or a written letter. Now language is increasingly *simulational* in the sense that the presentation is always both an original and a copy. "The TV news does not really report about something in an 'external' world: it makes important what it states, creating news as it 'reports' about it. This difficult logic, 'Hyperreality', increasingly dominates the exchanges of words and images, gradually forming a new and very strange culture" (Poster 1998).

For Baudrillard, the proliferation of signs and information in the media obliterates meaning by neutralising and dissolving all content -- leading to the destruction of distinctions between media

and reality. In a society saturated with media messages, information and meaning implode into meaningless. Baudrillard (1983a: 96-97, 100) writes: “[I]nformation is directly destructive of meaning and signification, or neutralizes it. The loss of meaning is directly linked to the dissolving and dissuasive action of information, the media, and the mass media ... Information devours its own contents; it devours communication and the social. ... Thus information dissolves meaning and the social into a sort of nebulous state leading not at all to a surfeit of innovation but to the very contrary, to total entropy”.⁹ The implication of this position is that a radical theory of the media is no longer possible. There are no “media” in the sense of institutions that mediate between dominant political and economic powers, on the one hand, and the population, on the other. For Baudrillard the implosion of “reality” is so severe that it is impossible to distinguish between media representations and the “reality” which they supposedly represent. The media further operates in an atmosphere of massification, which is characterised by mass audiences and massification of concepts and experiences. In this process the masses absorb the media content uncritically, and demand more spectacle and entertainment, thus intensifying the erosion of the boundary between media and “the real”. In this sense, the media implode into the masses to the extent that it is impossible to know what effects the media have on the masses and how the masses interpret the media.

This pessimistic (and fatal) interpretation of the masses, as Kellner (2003) remarks, carries in its reductive moments something of a manipulation theory – where the masses only want spectacle, diversion, entertainment and escape, and shield themselves from producing meaning. In a context where the media and the masses liquidate meaning, ideology critique of media messages becomes meaningless. At this point Baudrillard employs McLuhan’s concept of the “medium is the message” in the sense that media communication has no significant referents except its own images and noise which ceaselessly refer back and forth to other media images and spectacles.¹⁰ Baudrillard also uses an important distinction made by McLuhan, between “hot” and “cool” media for his own purposes. Hot events are sport, war, political turmoil, catastrophe, etc. These events are then transformed into “cool media events”, which are altogether another kind of experience. On sport as a hot and cool media event, Baudrillard (1990a: 217) writes: “... one is hot, the other is cool -- one is a contest where affect, challenge, mise en scene, and spectacle are present, whereas the other is tactile, modulated (visions in flash-back, replays, close-ups or overhead views, various

⁹ Baudrillard (1983a: 102-103) uses a model of the media as a black hole of signs and information which absorb all contents into cybernetic noise which no longer communicates meaningful messages in a process of implosion where all content implodes into form.

¹⁰ According to Kellner (2003) it is interesting to compare Baudrillard with McLuhan. Both interpret television (and other media) as technological forms and machines that produce primarily technological effects in which content and messages, or social uses, are deemed irrelevant and unimportant. Both anthropomorphize the media (“the television is watching you”), a form of technological mysticism (or mystification). Both see global media effects as the media demiurges of a new type of society and experience. Baudrillard also practices McLuhan’s literary strategy of mosaic constellations of images and concepts, which take on an experimental and provisional nature. Kellner (2003) also makes an interesting distinction between McLuhan’s “Catholicism” with Baudrillard’s “Protestantism”. According to this logic McLuhan envisages a new global community and the dissemination of a universal (media) consciousness and experience -- the global village. Here the media overcomes alienation produced by the abstract rationality of book culture, which is replaced by a new synaesthesia and harmonizing of the mind and body, senses and technologies. Baudrillard, though, sees the media as external demigods, or idols of the mind, which seduce and fascinate the subject and which enter subjectivity to produce a reified consciousness and privatized and fragmented life-style.

angles, etc.): a televised sports event is above all a televised event, just as Holocaust or the Vietnam war are televised events of which one can hardly make distinctions." The implication of this argument is that the media neutralise meaning and the audience undergoes a flat, one-dimensional media experience. The mass audience experience is one of passive absorption of images, rather than the active processing, production, and interpretation of meaning. The electronic media on this account have nothing to do with myth, image, history, or the construction of meaning (or ideology). Television is interpreted as a form of media "... which suggests nothing, which magnetises, which is only a screen, or is rather a miniaturized terminal which in fact is found immediately in your head -- you are the screen and the television is watching you. Television transistorizes all neurons and operates as a magnetic tape -- a tape not an image" (Baudrillard 1990a: 220).

Kellner (2003) perceptively explains Baudrillard's view of the mass media as being "instruments of a cold seduction". Here the "narcissistic charm" consists of a "manipulative self-seduction", where we "... enjoy the play of lights, shadows, dots, and events in our own mind as we change channels or media and plug into the variety of media and information networks that surround us and that allow us to become modulators and controllers of an overwhelming panoply of sights, sounds, information, and events. Such media have a chilling effect (here McLuhan's 'cool' becomes downright 'cold'), which freezes individuals into functioning as terminals of media and communication networks that become involved as part and parcel of the very apparatus of communication. The subject, then, becomes transformed into an object as part of a nexus of information and communication networks. The interiorization of media transmissions within the screen of our mind obliterates the distinction between public and private, interior and exterior space -- both replaced by media space". Kellner, though, makes an important distinction between Baudrillard and McLuhan's positions with regard to the present mediascape and subjectivity. "While McLuhan ascribes a generally benign social destiny to the media, for Baudrillard the function of TV and mass media is to prevent response, to isolate and privatize individuals, and to trap them into a universe of simulacra where it is impossible to distinguish between the spectacle and the real." It should thus be clear by now that Baudrillard's position of a "new theoretical anti-humanism" (Kellner 2003) also focuses on the influence of the media on individual identity.

This very theme of individual identity comes forward in Baudrillard's essay 'The Ecstasy of Communication', where the media are described in terms such as "obscenity", "transparency", and *ecstasy*. Baudrillard claims that the private sphere is exteriorised, or made transparent in the postmodern mediascape. He (Baudrillard 1983b: 130) writes: "... the most intimate processes of our lives become the virtual feeding ground of the media ... Inversely, the entire universe comes to unfold arbitrarily on your domestic screen (all the useless information that comes to you from the entire world, like a microscopic pornography of the universe, useless, excessive, just like the sexual close-up in a porno film): all this explodes the scene formerly preserved by the minimal separation of public and private, the scene that was played out in a restricted space". Baudrillard continues: "Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all becomes transparency and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and

inexorable light of information and communication". In ecstatic communication everything is explicit, ecstatic (out of or beyond itself), and obscene in its transparency, detail, and visibility.¹¹ There are no more secrets, scenes, privacy, depth or hidden meaning in the ecstasy of communication. Kellner (2003) refers to a "promiscuity of information and communication" "...in which the media circulate and disseminate a teeming network of cool, seductive and fascinating sights and sounds to be played on one's own screen and terminal. With the disappearance of exciting scenes (in the home, in the public sphere), passion evaporates in personal and social relations, yet a new fascination emerges ('the obscene fascinates us') with the very universe of media and communication. Here we enter a new form of subjectivity (the schizo) where he/she becomes saturated with information, images, events, and ecstasies". Without defense or distance, the individual or subject becomes, in Baudrillard's language, "... a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence" (1983b: 133). In other words, the era of subjectivity, privacy, and the inner life has passed; and a new era of vertigo, obscenity, instantaneity, and transparency emerges. Baudrillard's recent work ends on this pessimistic and fatal plateau. Consequently he tends to recycle his view on the media as being meaningless in various forms and contexts.

3. CRITICAL REMARKS

One of the outstanding aspects of Baudrillard's fascinating reading of contemporary societies is his ability to look at phenomena with a fresh and creative eye. Many of his concepts such as sign-value, symbolic exchange, hyperreality, and simulacra have become part of our contemporary social vocabulary. Baudrillard also provides a challenge for media studies. On this point Kellner (2000: 57) writes that media studies must "... attempt to theorize the new social conditions and phenomena analyzed by the postmodernists, and indicate what categories and theories are still applicable and relevant in theorizing the new social conditions". Against this background the motive of the first two parts of this contribution was to provide as fair as possible a reconstruction of Baudrillard's postmodern theory and its implications for communication and media studies. In this last part, though, some critical remarks will be made with regard to the following issues: capitalism and consumption (3.1.); macro-theories and meta-narratives (3.2.); technological determinism (3.3.); Critical Theory and postmodernism (3.4.); and context (3.5.).

3.1 Capitalism and consumption

Baudrillard's emphasis on the shift from a production-oriented capitalism to a commodity-driven capitalism (especially since the Second World War) has been indicated. This new phase of capitalism has also been described as *casino capitalism* (Strange 1997), the paradoxes of capitalism (Hartmann; Honneth 2006), and techno-capitalism (Kellner 2000: 59). Fulchner (2004: 56) describes this shift as a move from managed capitalism to "... an increasing individualism that gave greater priority to consumer choice and market provision". The difference though, between Baudrillard, on the one hand, and these other mentioned theorists (Strange, Honneth, Fulchner, and Kellner), on the other, is that where Baudrillard tends to take the current stage of capitalism as a given, the other group wants to develop a critical perspective on the contemporary neo-liberal type of

¹¹ *"It is no longer the traditional obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, forbidden or obscure; on the contrary, it is the obscenity of the visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-visible. It is the obscenity of what no longer has any secret, of what dissolves completely in information and communication" (Baudrillard 1983b: 131).*

consumption-driven capitalism. Fulchner, for example, indicates that the latest stage of *remarketized capitalism*, "... has in fact been characterized by a massive increase in state regulation ... This new world of remarketized capitalism provides greater choice and more freedom for the individual but also a less secure life, intensified work pressures, and greater inequality" (Fulchner 2004: 56). For Kellner (2000: 59) theorists like Baudrillard (but also Lyotard, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari) run the danger that they sever their work from a critique of capitalism precisely at a point when the logic of capital has been playing an increasingly important role in structuring the new stage of society as a new version of capitalism -- *techno-capitalism*. Techno-capitalism, according to this line of thought, determines what sorts of media are being produced, distributed, and consumed. In techno-capitalism information together with education is more and more commodified and only accessible to the rich.

3.2 Macro-theories and meta-narratives

Related to the previous point on the position of postmodernists (like Baudrillard) on the role of the new media in contemporary economic relations, the issue of micro- and macro theory can be added -- especially there where macro-social theory is downplayed in favour of micro theory and politics. Hence the phenomenon of meta-narratives (macro theories) must be retained in order to interpret the new totalising forms of capitalism in contemporary society. Such theories are needed to interpret new relations between the economical, cultural, educational, and political spheres. New social and technological developments could be conceptualised in terms of a theory of techno-capitalism that involves both micro- and macro theories. The new postmodern configuration of capitalism is one where capital attempts to control ever more domains of life. According to Kellner (2000: 58-59), a case can be made for the need to draw boundaries, or conceptual distinctions, rather than leaping into the delirious postmodern implosion of all boundaries, abstractions, and distinctions in the vertiginous flux of the hyperreal – as advocated by a radical implosive postmodernism (Baudrillard). The argument is not to dissolve differences in unifying schemes (as the later-Wittgenstein and Derrida caution), but we should also be able to draw distinctions which make connections and which conceptualise important differences.

3.3 Technological determinism

A further shortcoming of Baudrillard's project is the danger of technological determinism – something he shares with McLuhan. Fourie (2001: 249) defines technological determinism succinctly as the belief "... that technology and technological innovation drive social change, culture, economics, politics, and so on". According to Wood (and Fourie 2001: 251) the following criticisms can be brought against technological determinism: firstly, it is an open question as to whether there is enough empirical support for this position; secondly, it does not acknowledge other research, for example that there could be perspectives in film theory that go beyond the distinction between hot and cold media; thirdly, there is the danger of hyperbolic speculation, in the sense that literacy may be declared dead, but this does not diminish the fact that writing and literacy are still major cultural forces in our own time; fourthly, the power of the media is overestimated. Further, the belief

that human consciousness is controlled and *determined* by the media, is open to question. Is it not rather the case that the media contribute *partially* to our awareness and consciousness? Finally, technological determinism ignores the fact that only a small portion of the world's population has access to media (a point that will be further elaborated under 3.5.).

3.4 Critical Theory and postmodernism

With regard to the relationship between Critical Theory and the kind of postmodernism that Baudrillard represents, it is important to note how these theoretical traditions interpret the new media landscape -- for example new forms of information, cybernetics, design, labour and production processes? For Kellner (2000: 57) it is necessary that an influential theoretical tradition, such as Critical Theory, should answer the challenges of postmodernism. Thus he finds the attempts by Habermas (1987) and Wellmer (1991) to discredit postmodern thinkers (such as Derrida, Foucault, Bataille, and Baudrillard) as problematic. The point is that postmodernism is rejected precisely at those junctures where Critical Theory needs revision. Kellner (2000: 58) writes: "... ideology critique of media theory and the culture industry runs the risk of underemphasizing the importance of signs, codes, and the structure of media themselves -- precisely the focus of contemporary postmodernism". On the other hand, Baudrillard's contribution to communication should be supplemented by a grasp of the differences *and* the continuities between the old and the new society (modern and postmodern). For Kellner, continuity is constituted by "... the continuing importance of capitalist relations of production in contemporary society". Although postmodernists have crossed the borderline and charted out new terrain, their claims for an absolute break between modernity and postmodernity are not convincing. Kellner continues that we are living within a "transitional space", between the modern and the postmodern, and may be entering a terrain "where old modes of thought and language are not always useful", but where postmodernism also does not have all the answers. The point is that we need new theories to understand and resolve many of the theoretical and political problems that we face ("i.e. moving beyond the current age of conservative hegemony, learning to use and live with new technologies in ways that will enhance human life, and understanding and dealing with a wide range of social problems from technological unemployment to AIDS"), but these new theories should not be severed from a dialogue from earlier theoretical positions to create a more socially just world (Kellner 2000: 60-61).

3.5 Context

Finally, Baudrillard's postmodern media theory tends to be applicable to the conditions of a post-industrial Western society such as France. The question remains how does one apply his theory to societies such as South Africa, where a complex mix of premodern, modern, and postmodern worlds collides in everyday life?¹² Against this background, the challenge is to explore those intellectual traditions that have an influence on the South African context, to know where they came from, and, to understand how they were transformed under (post-)colonial conditions. Such a genealogical perspective, to borrow a term from Foucault, is worthwhile in that it provides a historical and material corrective to arguments that might otherwise strive to reconcile cultural

values and ideas in an apolitical and ahistorical manner. As the South African political philosopher André du Toit (1991) puts it, (post-) colonial societies do not develop autonomously, but they are the result of the transplantation of fragments of cultures and traditions rooted in other contexts. Against this background local traditions have to define their own ideas, values and aims within the ambit of hegemonic imperialist and other “foreign” discourses, even (perhaps especially) where they deliberately set themselves against these.

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