

## ARCHITECTURE

### *Francesco Proto*

From his early involvement in the French magazine *Utopie*, Baudrillard's commitment to architecture is noticeable throughout his *oeuvre*. Analogous to the third order of simulation, where the model always anticipates the real, architecture stands for Baudrillard as 'the context of a society already experiencing hyperrealism' (SA, 4).

This position, which anticipates *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994a [1981]), is already evidenced in *The Consumer Society* (1998a [1970]), where Baudrillard analyzes a new type of urban architecture: the hypermarket (Parly 2). De-centred and de-territorialized, the hypermarket is an out-of-town shopping mall that, modeled on traditional downtown shopping areas, is itself a model anticipating, projecting and de-centering a zone that is neither rural nor properly urbanized, the 'metro-area'. By generating a new mode of living and experiencing social spaces, the hypermarket also replaces organized religion in developed countries. Hypermarket shoppers interrogate objects for sale to find an answer to their concerns; yet, shoppers themselves are 'screened' to meet consumer referenda and tests (Lane, 2009). Places for the exchange of object-signs, hypermarkets, therefore, do not attain the role of object-signs.

Written in 1977 immediately after the completion of the Pompidou Centre (Paris), 'The Beaubourg Effect: Implosion or Deterrence' marks a new stage in Baudrillard's writing strategy, one in which different theoretical perspectives – sociological, philosophical, anthropological – are shaped with the frisson of science fiction. Here, the building is identified with a larger-than-life sign, which is later defined as a 'singular object' (SA). Hyper-functional like a hyper-commodity or

a gizmo, the building is compared to the black monolith from *2001- A Space Odyssey*: simultaneously fascinating and repellent, yet totally useless, it lies like a crushed, geometricised and imploded carcass. Baudrillard provides two explanations for this: first, the very absence of culture, as purveyed by the Beaubourg, produces a vacuum that swallows up all surrounding meaning; second, by flocking 'en masse' to the building, visitors cause it to buckle. Assuming modern culture to be a gift, Baudrillard considers the visitors' presence a 'further symbolic counter-gift' that, 'based on the potlatch-like behavior of the masses', reciprocates the former by 'critical mass' and 'sumptuary hyper-consumption of signs' (Genosko, 1994: xvi). The materialization of subtler and more abstract indices of social status, the Beaubourg thus epitomizes the apotheosis of political revenge: the end of discrimination and privilege after the events of May 1968 (Proto, 2006). As culture is 'a site of the secret, of seduction, of initiation, of a restrained and highly ritualized symbolic exchange' (SS, 64), it ends up being simulated by the Beaubourg along with the power by which it has supposedly been generated. Baudrillard makes this position clear in discussing the Duke of Montefeltro's *studiolo* in Urbino (Italy), a secret room in the middle of the castle where the lack of wall openings is compensated for by the presence of *trompe l'oeil* (S). Scenic spaces *par excellence*, the deceptions are here to signify that all the forms of power, such as seduction, are imaginary spaces, for seduction itself is but the ability to deceive or dissimulate (FF). Yet the Pompidou does not deceive; it deludes and disappoints; disenchant or, at best, fascinates: real power, like real knowledge, is non-negotiable, and therefore under wraps.

To explain this concept Baudrillard resorts to the Watergate scandal of the 1970s as a metaphor for Disneyland: just as the impeachment of the US President Nixon was only meant to rejuvenate a fundamentally empty belief – the principle that moral law regulates politics – so Disneyland is 'a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real'. According to Baudrillard, the amusement park only exists to convince us that rationality is out there, that the 'real' America is outside the walls of its childish domain, when in effect rationality has been replaced by childishness everywhere. Disneyland does not belong to the second, but to the

third order of simulation: rather than blurring the difference between reality and representation, its fairy-tale castles ‘hide that it is the “real” country, all of “real” America that *is* Disneyland’ (*SS*, 12). Always anticipated by its model – that is, America – Disneyland recalls the Bonaventure Hotel, where the labyrinthine, sanitized, and self-enclosed nature of the building is also a sign of emptiness and death: by simulating the urban environment as perfected, it mirrors the perfection of a society at its end.

Baudrillard’s dystopic vision culminates in his analysis of the World Trade Center, where the only possible response to the terrorist attack of 9/11 is for architecture ‘to commit suicide’ through symbolic death (*ST*). Caught in the middle of a war where what is at stake are not the principles of good and evil, but the self-destruction of the West, in Baudrillard’s body of work architecture is now placed at the very heart of the symbolic exchange. Indeed, to Baudrillard, the Twin Towers most perfectly mirror the abstract codes (genetic and binary) on which simulation is modeled; yet, paradoxically, their destiny is also anticipated by Hollywood’s dark sci-fi genre (Proto, 2006). Given this equivalence between architecture and its symbolic bearing, not only does their destruction implicitly acknowledge the end of US hegemony; but their implosion, which recalls the fate anticipated for the Beaubourg, poses again the question that is a hallmark of Baudrillard’s thought: ‘What are you doing after the orgy?’ (*TE*). That is: what happens after ‘utopia’ is finally ‘achieved’?

Baudrillard’s position with regard to architecture is therefore twofold. On the one hand, he explains architecture’s collusion with the system of the objects, with its differential logic of prestige and with the code as a general logic; on the other, he recognizes its socio-political relevance within the symbolic domain. Contrary to contemporary art that has, for him, exhausted all means and meaning (*CA*), architecture may still have the capacity to escape its limitations. By setting up a ‘new illusion of urban space’, architecture can in fact bypass the ‘illusions [that have for so long been generated] about itself’ (Baudrillard, 1999: 30).

## **Passwords**

Art

Beaubourg

City

Code

Consumption + Affluent Society

Masses

Science Fiction

Simulation

Symbolic Exchange

Utopie