

# *Jean Baudrillard: Radical Morality and Thoughts on the End of History*

Keith Jenkins Chichester Institute of Higher Education

Now in his late 60s and for many years Professor of Sociology at the University of Paris (Nanterre) and Visiting Professor at various American universities, Jean Baudrillard is famous, or infamous, worldwide. A sometime columnist for the French daily *Libération*, a television personality, an acclaimed conference speaker, a web-site guru, the subject (object) of dozens of features in 'trendy' magazines (Figaro Magazine, Les Inrockuptibles, The Face ...) Baudrillard has all the trappings and attracts all the hype of a media star. Within academia he escapes easy categorisation as he ranges across vast swathes of intellectual territory: sociology, philosophy, literature, history, politics, architecture, etc. The author of numerous books (for instance *Symbolic Exchange & Death* (1976), *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), *Fatal Strategies* (1983), *America* (1988), *Seduction* (1990), *The Illusion of the End* (1992), *The Transparency of Evil* (1993), *Cool Memories* (1995), *The Perfect Crime* (1995) ...) Baudrillard violates, in his ceaseless 'border crossings', the neat disciplinary boxes of scholarship to the discomfort, and sometimes to the disgust, of those firmly tucked-up inside them. Accordingly, such an irritating transgressor is easy to characterise, and then dismiss, as a scholarly lightweight, a gadfly lacking propriety, seriousness and rigour; a joker, a charlatan, 'The Walt Disney of contemporary metaphysics', a representative of postmodernism at its emptiest and wackiest, a hyper-relativist who, according to Christopher Norris, 'is lost in the funhouse'!<sup>1</sup>

It is not my intention here to 'correct' these possible misreadings which seem to pepper the Baudrillardian literature. Besides, as Baudrillard himself comments, such corrective ambitions are always ultimately impossible. For

as he insists, because every discursive analysis defines its own meaningful object of study relative to the analyst's interests, then any object – and in this case Baudrillard – escapes definitive closure. There is no definitive or 'comprehensive' Baudrillard in what follows then; rather what I want to do is to explicate some of the reasons why he thinks we have now come to the 'end of history' or, more accurately, the end of the illusion that the past could be construed as if it had an end 'in it'. When Baudrillard – and many others, especially postmodernists – talk about the end of history, of course, they are not talking about the end of life or saying that the future won't come. Their argument is that the peculiar ways in which the past was historicised (was conceptualised in, especially, modernist, linear and essentially metanarrative forms) have now come to the end of their productive life as the all-encompassing 'experiment of modernity' – of which metanarratives were a key constitutive part – passes away in our postmodern condition. This means that the idea (which we now recognise as 'just an idea') of history having an end is an idea now behind us, in the sense that the modernist attempt to realise it has failed. Baudrillard thinks that this makes everything different. In an interview with Scott Lash and Roy Boyne Baudrillard argues that, in understanding the idea of the end of history, we have to

start out from the fact that something has happened – a break, a mutation has taken place – and that we are in a new world ... Here, I think, there is a genuine break with modernity. This is perhaps the only case in which we can really take the term 'postmodern' seriously ... We have really passed beyond something, perhaps even beyond the end – I've analysed this question in *The Illusion of the End* – and, in fact, there is no finality or end any longer, because we have already passed beyond. And there, the rules are no longer the same ... We are not this side of finality. This is what I mean when I say everything is realised ... And having to make sense of a world where the end is not ahead of us but behind us ... changes everything.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Baudrillard isn't the first to spot the absurdity of thinking that there was a knowable, immanent teleology in the 'historicised past'; the absurdity of thinking that the events of the past actually 'had the shapes of stories'. Karl Popper famously critiqued this idea many years ago, whilst J. F. Lyotard's remark – that in our postmodern condition the only attitude we can possibly have towards metanarrative is incredulity ('I define postmodernism as that of having an attitude of incredulity towards metanarratives') has become a commonplace. But what is arguably unique in Baudrillard is the way in which a whole battery of terms (simulacra, simulation, seduction, the object, reversibility, hyper-reality, etc.) as well as cross-disciplinary/cross cultural analyses of 'our' condition, are brought to bear not just on the illusory idea of history as having an end, but also on the notion that any sort of meaning or significance can be 'found' in it as opposed to being imposed on it. And

I think that Baudrillard conducts his analyses in such a way that they suggest the figure (an unusual one in the Baudrillardian literature) of Baudrillard as a moralist; of Baudrillard as offering a radical, moral critique of our social, political, logical, ethical economies, a critique which opens up for him the glimmer of a future 'beyond history and ethics', a future of interminable ironies and reversals and temporalities, where the 'excess' of any 'economic reduction' (that is, the reduction of the sublimity and indifference of existence to definite and definitive orderings which have about them the now moribund characteristics of 'foundationalism') is reactivated subversively.

This is not to say that Baudrillard thinks that he has 'real grounds' for his critique. Baudrillard's critique is – if I can put it this way – 'absolutely reflexive', in that the axioms he argues his position from are, of course, arbitrary and 'fictional', the outcome of a constitutive choice. Having made that choice (a choice constantly refined and expanded over the years) his position, far from being an 'irrational' or 'nihilistic' one (common charges levelled against him) is recognisably 'rational', coherent and critical. This general position, which informs all his work, can be understood – very briefly – in ways which go something like this.

For Baudrillard the world (as an object of enquiry) and the phenomenological objects and 'events' that constitute it, are never fully captured in even the most finely-grained analyses we conduct. The 'object' of enquiry always remains out of our reach, definitely inexplicable, skipping clear of all and every attempt to 'pin it down', so that Baudrillard talks of the 'revenge of the object', the way it retaliates against our efforts to control it while continuing to seduce us into thinking that – next time – it will be ours; that its radical otherness/alterity will be reduced to the same, to us. But that time never comes. Beyond every analysis there is always something 'disruptive' left out; beyond even the most tightly sutured context there is a further context; beyond every closure there remains something which should have been inside, such that the world (and worlds 'past') remain sublime, ineffable, eternally other, interminably interpretable: everything can be put under another description, another constitutive performative. And Baudrillard likes this. Because it means that no closure is ever a total closure; no attempt to achieve 'full presence' is ever 'full', and thus no social formation is ever fully stable, ever immune from critique, ever free of destabilisation as those 'useful-fictions' – those simulations of reality that pass for reality *per se* and which pragmatically 'stabilise things' – are revealed as but ephemeral, discursive 'effects of the real' through yet further simulations. Consequently, Baudrillard is happy to accept that the world is not only unintelligible but that the task is to critique all and every attempt at 'making it' intelligible thereby unsettling all attempts to stabilise the *status quo*. As Baudrillard puts it, 'The absolute rule of thought is to give back the world as it was given to us – unintelligible. And, if possible, to render it a little more unintelligible'.<sup>3</sup> To have to the world, then, an attitude *not* of nihilism (for there is never any-

thing knowably there to really lose or feel nostalgic and remorseful about in the first place ...) but of *indifference* this is Baudrillard's position, a position of indifference that is generative of endless ethical critiques. In the Lash-Boyne interview Baudrillard makes the point thus:

Ultimately, what might be closest to a morality would be a rule of stripping-away, the rule of the Stoics. This isn't [meant as] something positive ... There is no ideality here, but an indifference on the part of the world and nature ... The only task, then, would be to clear a space, as it were, around the object, to act so that it shone out resplendent in all its indifference ... so that the subject himself can attune himself to the world in a kind of symbolic exchange of indifference ... [I have not been] forgiven for [taking this attitude], for not according value, for not adding value to something, to some particular process and, ultimately, for offering no kind of solution, opening or ideal, or the like. It is in that sense, that I am indifferent. Not nihilistic but indifferent ... To come to terms with this situation ... the rule must be *not* to try and escape this kind of profound indifference ... by [trying to retrieve] value and difference, but to play with this indifference – this objective indifference which is our destiny – to manage to transform this fateful indifference into the rule of the game, if not indeed play with it. And to recover a sort of passion for indifference.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, it is this attitude not of nihilism or irresponsibility or irrationalism or immorality but of indifference, that metaphorically and heuristically 'underpins' Baudrillard's position, a position connected by him to the possibility of an emancipatory and democratic future in excess of all previous and current imaginaries. For 'where symbolic exchange, reversibility and the rest are concerned, everyone has the same potential. We are not equal before the law, of course, the law is a principle of profound inequality. But everyone is equal before the rule [of indifference] because it is arbitrary. So there we find the foundations of a true democracy ... though not by any means of the usual political type'.<sup>5</sup> And I think that it is this idea which gives Baudrillard the notion of a future beyond 'certainty' and 'endism', however articulated; a future of relativistic, reversing ironies; of temporalities which reverse linearity and teleology – and then themselves, over and over. As Baudrillard puts it:

Our situation is a wholly pataphysical one; that is to say, everything around us has passed beyond its own limits, has moved beyond the laws of physics and metaphysics. Now, pataphysics is ironic, and the hypothesis which suggests itself here is that, *at the same time as things have reached a state of paroxysm, they have also reached a state of parody*

Might we advance the hypothesis – beyond the heroic stage, beyond the critical stage – of an ironic stage of technology, an ironic stage of history, an ironic stage of value? This would at last free us from the Heideggerian

vision of technology as the effectuation and final stage of metaphysics, it would free us from all retrospective nostalgia for being, and we would have, rather, a gigantic objectively ironic 'take' on all this scientific and technical process ...

[Consequently] ironic hypotheses ... being by definition unverifiable, let us [thus] content ourselves with the undecidable ... [such that] we are faced in the end with two irreconcilable hypotheses: that of the perfect crime or, in other words, of the extermination by technology and virtuality of all reality – and equally of the illusion of the world – or that of the ironic play of technology, of an ironic destiny of all science and all knowledge [including history] by which the world – and the illusion of the world – are perpetuated. Let us content ourselves with these two irreconcilable and simultaneously 'true' perspectives. There is nothing that allows us to decide between them. As Wittgenstein says, 'The world is everything which is the case'.<sup>6</sup>

So much, then, for some prefacing remarks. Within the context they have hopefully established (and I shall recontextualise some of them in what follows) let me now go on to discuss Baudrillard's position on how the possibilities opened up by the end of history (modernist – linear- metanarrative style) might indeed suggest a radical, moral, critical re-thinking of 'timing time beyond the heroic stage'; might indeed suggest also the coming into existence of an 'ironic stage of history' beyond all 'the old laws' yet congruent with the 'rules of indifference', of endless, reversible simulacra which, for Baudrillard seems 'to be' actuality. The reading I want to give, which is based on Baudrillard's book *The Illusion of the End* and, intermittently, his essay 'The End of the Millennium or The Countdown', is organised here around the following *three* questions.<sup>7</sup>

I ask *first*: what sort of conditions does Baudrillard think existed for a way of carving up the past 'historically' such that it offered us the illusion of it having an end; that allowed linear histories 'without irony' to emerge? I ask *second*: what sort of hypotheses does Baudrillard play with to undercut such illusions; to suggest, as he does, that 'endism' is no longer before but behind us ('having to make sense of a world where the end is not ahead of us but behind us ... changes everything') *Thirdly* I ask: in this 'new situation' (our contemporary condition) are there – though this is 'reading into' Baudrillard something which is, despite my above comments, more problematic given that Baudrillard's *metier* is *critique* and not anything suggestive of a positive beyond – new forms of troping the past that might suggest a 'poetic reversability of events'; of radically new, *ironic* modes not of historicising but of 'timing time'?

So to the first question: what conditions have to be met for events which occur to give rise to the idea that such events constitute a sense of (modernist) linear histories? Baudrillard's answer is brief but constitutes his work-

ing hypothesis. A degree of slowness is required; that is, a certain speed – but not too much. A degree of distance is required; that is, a certain spacing – but not too much. And a degree of liberation is required (an ‘energy for rupture and change’) – but not too much. Together, these factors bring about ‘the condensations and significant crystallisation of events we call history, the kind of coherent unfolding of causes and effects we call reality’.<sup>8</sup> It is such conditions that, existing in their optimum condition in the nineteenth century especially, arguably produced our now moribund linear/endist histories of meaning.

So to my second question: what hypotheses does Baudrillard use to suggest that such histories are indeed moribund and behind us? Baudrillard has (at least) three hypotheses and some general comments.

First, Baudrillard draws on Elias Cannetti’s ‘tormenting thought’ that, ‘as of a certain point, history was no longer *real*. Without noticing it, all mankind suddenly left reality’, a thought suggesting the idea of that ‘escape velocity a body requires to free itself from the gravitational field of a star or a planet’.<sup>9</sup> Staying with this image, Baudrillard suggests that the accelerations of modernity have given ‘us’ the velocity enabling us to hurtle free of ‘the referential sphere of the real and of history’. Accordingly, beyond this gravitational effect which had kept bodies circulating regularly and predictably, each atom pursues its own trajectory and is lost in space. This, says Baudrillard ‘is precisely what we are seeing in our ... societies, intent as they are on accelerating all bodies, messages and processes in all directions and which, with modern media, have created for every event, story and image a simulation of an infinite trajectory’.<sup>10</sup>

Every political, historical and cultural fact thus possesses a kinetic energy which ‘propels it into hyperspace where, since it will never return, it loses all meaning’. No need for science fiction here, adds Baudrillard. In our computers, circuits and networks we have the particle accelerator to ‘smash the referential orbit of things once and for all’.<sup>11</sup> No human language can withstand the speed of light; no event can withstand being beamed across the planet, no meaning can withstand this kind of acceleration. And no history can withstand ‘the centrifugation of facts or their being short-circuited in real time’; history has ended here precisely because that essential re-telling (re-citatum) has become impossible since it is, by definition, ‘the possible recurrence of a sequence of meanings’.<sup>12</sup>

Baudrillard’s second hypothesis ‘reverses’ the first: it has to do not with speeding up but slowing down. It is one he claims to take directly from physics. Matter slows the passing of time. Time at the surface of a dense body seems to be in slow motion. This intensifies as the density increases. In turn this increases the length of the light wave emitted. Beyond a certain limit time stops; the wavelength becomes infinite. The light goes out. Analogously, history slows down as it ‘rubs up against’ the body of the ‘silent majorities’; against the sluggish density of the ‘mass of the masses’. This is of the utmost

significance, the emergence, in the very course of their mobilisation and revolutionary process, of an equivalent force of inertia. This inertia is not, perhaps paradoxically, produced by a lack of exchange or communication, but by the saturation of such exchanges: the hyperdensity of cities, commodities and exchange. Here events cascade over each other, cancelling each other out – where are they all leading to? Consequently, the masses, ‘mithridatised by information’ in turn neutralise history such that, unable to escape from this overdense body, time slows to a point where ‘right now, the perception and imagination of the future are beyond us’; are behind us. History (as modernist, linear progress and endism) ends here, not for want of activity but aimlessness: ‘It is no longer able to transcend itself ... to dream of its own end; it is being buried beneath its own immediate effect, worn out in special effects, imploding into current effects ... its effects are accelerating, but its meaning is slowing inexorably’.<sup>13</sup>

This phenomenon, which Baudrillard calls ‘the event strike’ (incidentally the subtitle of *The Illusion of the End* in French is ‘the event strike’ – *la grève événements*) is a crucial part of his argument. What, then, does it mean? Well it means, and I quote, ‘That the work of history has ceased to function. Thus the work of mourning is beginning. That the information system is taking over the baton from History and starting to produce the event in the same way that Capital is starting to produce Work, so that labour no longer has any significance of its own’, just as the event produced by information has no historical meaning of its own. For what has been lost today is the prodigious event, the event which is measured neither by its causes nor its consequences but creates its own stage, its own dramatic effect. Events ‘now have no more significance than their anticipated meaning, their programming or their broadcast’. This results in one of these ironic reversals Baudrillard is so good at spotting; namely, that it is this event strike itself which actually constitutes a ‘true’ historical phenomenon – this refusal ‘to signify anything whatever, or this capacity to signify anything at all. This is the true end of history, the end of historical reason’.<sup>14</sup> Yet this doesn’t mean – and this has to be underlined – that history *per se* has finished. What has disappeared is, as Baudrillard puts it, the prestige of the event, the sense of purpose, meaning, significance. *Petit* events are still being manufactured in that abundance which is the very thing which is fuelling the end of those linear histories which had at least the illusion of meaning, of endism; of some point. For Baudrillard then, contemporary social formations look suspiciously like that postmodernism which is the cultural logic of late capitalism: everything is surface, effect and affectation; pastiche and collage are the dominant figures. What is lacking is depth, power, weight, gravity, and that gravitas only serious, non-ironists have; consequently rather than ‘pressing forward and taking flight into the future we [now] prefer ... blanket revisionism’.<sup>15</sup> Today we are condemned to an ‘infinite retrospective’ of historical cleansing. ‘Our’ societies are revising everything, laundering their political crimes, their dirty

money, their dirty history. Today – and not least as we move toward the millennium – we are rifling through the dustbins of history looking for redemption in the rubbish. But it's worse than that. For the end of history is also the end of the dustbin of history. Consequently the problem becomes one of waste; of waste disposal. Where, asks Baudrillard, are we going to put our waste products, our defunct ideologies, bygone utopias, old regimes, old values: 'who will rid us of the sedimentation of centuries of stupidity?' As for history – 'that living lump of waste, that dying monster which, like the corpse in Ionesco's *Amédée*, continues to swell after it has died – how are we to be rid of it?' Well, maybe there is no problem. Maybe it's resolved by incineration and re-cycling. Anything that won't burn is recycled such that, ironically, we may 'not be spared the worst – that is, *history will not come to an end* – since the leftovers ... the Church, ethnic groups, conflicts, ideologies – are indefinitely recyclable'. All that we believed over and done with, left behind in the inexorable march of progress, is not dead at all but festering in its revenge ... here modernity has never happened, here reactionary conflicts which we thought had gone for ever are re-kindled. What is stupendous, says Baudrillard, is that all the old forms are ready to re-emerge, intact and timeless like viruses deep in the body and with utterly problematic potentialities which can, ironically, be read, and go, 'either way'.

Now, these two hypotheses (both of which are equally plausible or implausible – again that is what is so ironic about them) of history quickening up or slowing down through what has happened to meaning, to 'events in modernity', is returned to by Baudrillard in the penultimate chapter of *The Illusion of the End* under the title of 'Exponential Instability, Exponential Stability', and combined. Baudrillard's argument here is that in a non-linear, non-Euclidean space of history, the end is never locatable; realisable. An 'end' is, in fact, only conceivable in a logical order of causality and continuity, whereas today 'it is the events themselves which, by their artificial production, their programmed occurrence or the anticipation of their effects ... are suppressing the cause-effect relation and hence all historical continuity'.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, this distortion of cause-effect, this cause-effect reversability, engenders a disorder resembling 'Chaos Theory' such that 'perhaps history itself has to be regarded as a chaotic formation in which acceleration puts an end to linearity and the turbulence created ... deflects [it] definitively from its end ... this is one version of chaos theory – that of exponential instability. It accounts very well for the 'end' of history, interrupted in its linear or dialectical movement by that catastrophic singularity ... of contemporary events'. But that's not all. For there is another state – exponential stability – which defines a state in which, no matter where you start from you always end up at the same point. No potentialities develop. Consequently there is once again no end, 'not from effects becoming excessive and unpredictable, but because everything is already there, everything has taken place'. But that's not all either. For, though incompatible, these

two hypotheses are 'in fact simultaneously valid'. Our current condition ironically embodies both them: 'It combines in effect an inflation, a galloping acceleration, a dizzying whirlpool of mobility, an eccentricity of events and an excess of meaning and information with an exponential tendency towards total entropy. Our systems are thus doubly chaotic'. And it is this chaos which, after the illusion of an 'endism' which 'straightened things out', we are left with: 'condemned to an intense metabolism ... they become exhausted within themselves and no longer have any destination, any end ... they are condemned, precisely, to the epidemic, to the endless excrescences of the fractal ... We know only the signs of catastrophe now; we no longer know the signs of destiny'.<sup>17</sup>

These, then, are the first two of Baudrillard's three hypotheses. What is his third? Baudrillard calls it the 'stereophonic effect'. He writes:

We are all obsessed with high fidelity, with the quality of musical 're-production'. At the console of our stereos, armed with our tuners ... we mix, adjust settings, multiply tracks in pursuit of a flawless sound. Is this still music? Where is the high fidelity threshold beyond which music disappears as such? It does not disappear for lack of music, but because it has passed this limit point; it disappears ... into its own special effect ... It is the ecstasy of musicality, and its end.<sup>18</sup>

Analogously, history's disappearance is of the same order. By dint of their efforts, historians mix and remix, dub and redub, interpret and reinterpret the past in pursuit of a flawless history. Is this still the past? Just as at the 'very heart' of hi-fi, music threatens to disappear, so at the very heart of news, history threatens to disappear ... 'everywhere we find the same stereophonic effect; the same effect of absolute proximity to the real, the same effect of simulation'.<sup>19</sup> The passing of this point is, says Baudrillard, irreversible. We shall never get back to pre-stereo, pre-unsimulated music (except by additional, technical, simulation effects); we shall never get back to pre-news, pre-media history (except by additional, technical, simulation effects). Besides, what was that 'real' music, that 'real' history, but previous simulations anyway? Here the very idea of history dissolves into an interminable simulation mode; 'iterability' without beginning or end.

For of course – and here I leave Baudrillard's three hypotheses to look briefly at his general remarks connected to them – the fact that we're now leaving history to move into a realm of simulation doesn't mean that history hasn't always been 'an immense simulation model'. Because it has. Not only in the sense – though this is an important sense – that it has only ever existed in the various (generally narrative) forms we have carved the past up into but, says Baudrillard simulated in the sense of the concept of time in which the past was troped to unfold – in modernist, non-reversible, linear mode. And

it is this – the simulation of history as ‘linear endism’, as the illusion of having an end, that has now ended. We are thus no longer ‘this side of finality’ (as an end to be fulfilled; an end ‘still to come’) but beyond finality. Thus, to recall parts of an earlier remark I quoted from the Lash-Boyne interview but now perhaps better ‘contextualised’:

having to make sense of a world where the end is not ahead of us but behind us and already realised, changes everything. Here, I think, there is a genuine break with modernity. This is perhaps the only case in which we can really take the term ‘postmodern’ seriously. There has been a kind of break ... And I mean by this that we are now in a different world. We have really passed beyond something, perhaps even beyond the end ... there is no finality or end any longer, because we have already passed beyond. And there, the rules are no longer the same.<sup>20</sup>

And so I come to my third and final question which is, to recall, the following: in this new situation (arguably our ‘postmodern condition’) is there anything suggestive of new forms of troping the past which might suggest new modes *not* of historicising ‘time’ but of ‘timing’ it in the *ironic* way Baudrillard considers favourably, and which might be a critique of present arrangements? As I have already said, this idea of Baudrillard having something positive to say may look as if it subverts the view of Baudrillard as ‘always and only’ a radical critic. But maybe it doesn’t. For Baudrillard’s more positive comments can still act as a critique of our current condition which is, very precisely, one beyond which ‘we’ cannot see; in that sense Baudrillard’s ‘beyond’ only further problematises any answers of a serious ‘historical kind’ by pointing to the simulacra status of all such imaginaries – ‘straight’ or ironic.

I take my leave in answering my third question from Baudrillard’s summary of our current condition. Today, he says, we seem unable to dream of a past or future state of things. We are in a condition ‘which is literally definitive – neither finished, nor infinite, nor definite, but de-finitive, that is, deprived of its end’.<sup>21</sup> Against which, he says, there remains – and this is a crucial sentence – ‘the completely improbable and, no doubt, unverifiable hypothesis of a *poetic reversability of events*, more or less the only evidence for which is the existence of the same possibility in language’.<sup>22</sup> And why should Baudrillard want this improbable thought ... this ‘perhaps’; this hypothesis? Well, it may well be that this stems from his remarks, a few pages before the above lines, of keeping open the possibility of something akin to Nietzsche’s *transvaluation of all values based upon the illusion of the world itself*;<sup>23</sup> that is, to keep open the radical possibility of an illusion of the actuality of the world which previous/current illusions have concealed in their various closures, their ‘ficture shelters’ of truth, becoming, meaning, etc; and

to which we can, as stated, 'only oppose the *illusion* of the world itself, whose rules, admittedly mysterious and arbitrary [for the world is, for Baudrillard, a *gift*] are nonetheless imminent and necessary'<sup>24</sup> and which seem expressible (hypothetically) in a form 'not far removed from poetic form'.<sup>25</sup>

Well, whatever the possible 'readings' of all this, I contend that Baudrillard does outline at least some possible forms which, though they are (probably totally) 'illusory', may at least ('improbably') open up a mental space for something 'in excess'. Let me thus follow him through the last few pages of his text, add a few comments, and then end when he does.

'The poetic form is not far removed from the chaotic form.' This is Baudrillard's starting point and he seems to hold this view because both forms flout the law of cause and effect, there being a (metaphoric) affinity between the immanence of poetic development – 'which is ours today' and the immanence of 'chaotic development' ... 'the unfolding of events which are ... without meaning and consequence and in which – with effects substituting themselves for causes – there are no longer any causes, but *only effects*. The world is there, *effectively*. There is no reason for this, and God is dead'.<sup>26</sup>

Consequently, if nothing exists but effects, we are in a state of total illusion – in the poetic. If the effect is in the cause, or the beginning in the end, then the catastrophe is behind us, this liberating us from any future responsibility in that regard: 'We are free of the Last Judgement'. This brings us, says Baudrillard suggests, to his poetic, ironic analysis of events. Against the simulation of a linear (modernist) history as 'progress', we can thus privilege 'those backfires, those malign deviations'; those ruptures, breaks, reversals which, covered over by our language of continuity, we can now see as just other types of trope, *none crazier or more sensible than linearity but just 'different'*. All of which suggests, that not only has 'history' never actually unfolded in a linear fashion, but that 'perhaps language has never unfolded in a linear fashion' either: 'Everything moves in loops, tropes, inversions of meaning, except in numerical and artificial languages which, for that very reason, *no longer are languages*'.<sup>27</sup> We live in a world which just 'is' paratactic, which is to say asyntactic, which is to say, meaning-less. We live today recognising that the grammar of our language created a 'grammatical history', not allowed us to 'discover one'.

Subsequently Baudrillard asks 'might we not transpose new language games on to social and historical phenomena' of a different poetics, to those which we have got used to? Such a project might read the past through 'anagrams, acrostics, spoonerisms, rhyme, strophe and catastrophe', and fabricate a temporality not just through the major figures of metaphor (metonymy, synecdoche, etc.), but through 'instant, puerile formalistic games, the heteroclitite tropes which are the delight of the vulgar imagination'. And are there social spoonerisms, or an anagrammatic history (where meaning is dismembered and scattered to the winds, like the name of God is the anagram), and rhyming forms of political action or events which can be

read in either direction? Is there a chance, Baudrillard adds, that history lends itself to such a poetic convulsion which would even

beyond meaning – allow the pure materiality of language to show through, and, beyond historical meaning – allow the pure materiality of time to show through? Such would be the enchanted alternative to the linearity of history, the poetic alternative to the disenchanting confusion, the chaotic profusion of present events.<sup>28</sup>

For in this way, concludes Baudrillard, we might enter, beyond the illusion of history and the illusion of the end of history, into that greatest illusion of all – *The radical illusion of the world* in all its apparent, radical *indifference* to our most ambitious attempts to fold it into our ontologies of closure. Again, to recall, in the Lash-Boyne interview, Baudrillard talked about how the only task he has ever really had has been that of clearing a space around the object – the world, the past, history – so that it shone out in its indifference, so that, and I quote again, the subject ‘can attune himself to the world, harmonise with the world in a kind of symbolic exchange of indifference’.<sup>29</sup> He has not been forgiven, he adds, for taking this attitude, ‘for not according value, for not adding value to something, to some particular process and, ultimately, for offering no kind of solution, opening an ideal, or the like ... In that sense, I am indifferent. Not nihilistic but indifferent ... [one must] try to play with this indifference ... which is our destiny ... And to recover a sort of passion for indifference’.<sup>30</sup>

This recovery of a passion for ironic indifference is, I think, what Baudrillard achieves in his final few pages, and from this context, we can now understand Baudrillard’s somewhat gnomic comments in *The Perfect Crime* to which I have alluded above: ‘The absolute rule of thought is to give back the world as it was given to us – unintelligible. And, if possible, to render it a little more unintelligible.’<sup>31</sup> It is this unintelligible world which Baudrillard captures in the final paragraph of *The Illusion of the End* with which I end:

In this very way, we enter, beyond history, upon pure fiction ... The illusion of our history opens on to *the greatly more radical illusion of the world* Now we have closed the eyelids of the Revolution ... now that the lips of protest are closed ... now Europe – and memories – are no longer haunted by the spectre of communism, nor even by that of power, now the aristocratic illusion of the origin and the democratic illusion of the end are increasingly receding, we no longer have the choice of advancing, of persevering in the present destruction, or of retreating – but only of facing up to this radical illusion.<sup>32</sup>

Notes

- 1 C. Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism* Hemel Hempstead, 1990, pp. 164-93
- 2 S. Lash and R. Boyne, 'Symbolic Exchange - Taking Theory Seriously: An Interview with Jean Baudrillard', *Theory, Culture & Society* 12.4 (1995), 79-95, 94-5.
- 3 J. Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*(London), p. 105.
- 4 S. Lash and R. Boyne, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- 6 J. Baudrillard, 'The End of the Millennium or the Countdown', *Economy and Society*, 26.4 (1997), 447-55, p. 455
- 7 J. Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*(Cambridge, 1994).
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 21-2.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 22.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 94-5.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- 29 R. Boyne and S. Lash, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 31 J. Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
- 32 J. Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, pp. 122-3.