Authors Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel share the thesis that “We’re not heading for disaster, we’re already in the midst of total disaster.” This provocation sets the tone for a book that, despite its title, contains abundant insights about contemporary communication, especially for scholars who have tended to ignore architecture. The two extended interviews that comprise the book illustrate the vital communicative function of architecture as we pass into cybernetic societies in which “everything is communication.” Baudrillard & Nouvel also share a number of insights into what certain “singular objects of architecture” like the World Trade Center or the Pompidou Centre communicate. For New York, the Twin Towers stood as an “anticipatory sign of the computerized, genetically networked, cloning society that was emerging.” For Paris, “Beaubourg represents both the fact of culture and the thing that killed culture, the thing it succumbed to, in other words, the confusion of signs, the excess, the profusion” (p. 38). The mutation of New York into a scarcely habitable monstrosity leads Baudrillard to refer to it as “the epicenter of the end of the world” (p. 14). Nouvel sees Paris, with its miniaturization of apartments and preservation of facades over radically new structures, as an “embalmed” city.

Readers who have not encountered Nouvel before will find him in possession of a thoughtful inquisitiveness that allows him to travel beyond the last of our disciplined academic horizons, where we have found Baudrillard for the past 20 years. Those familiar with Baudrillard’s thought will not find new insights in this book as much as they will encounter intelligent applications of his antagonistic approach to theory, communications, and globalization. Nouvel is a Paris-based architect of international acclaim who, like others in recent years (such as Rem Koolhaus or Peter Eisenman), actively engages with social and communications scholars about the meaning of their work. Nouvel is especially interested in the ways that architecture communicates dematerialization at a time when advertising/consumer culture is dematerializing, through its communication processes, what we formerly attempted to refer to with certainty as “the social.” For Nouvel, as has long been the case with Baudrillard, clarification is impossible but the important insights, however temporary and transitory, emerge from having looked. The radical and incomplete nature of the dialogue in this book provides a productive insight into the art of looking and attempting to communicate what we see in our present “screened” realities.

Baudrillard has long written against the grain of the simulated positivism hegemonic in the university and toward a more candid apprehension of the radical, and necessarily incomplete, contribution that the best scholarly work inevitably makes. He has also established himself as an antagonist of globalization, pointing repeatedly to its destiny of failure. The “singularity” in the book’s title explicitly refers to a search for singular objects (what Baudrillard has also previously sought in extreme phenomena), rather than the homogenized, the cloned, or the global. For him, the result of the lapse of reason is the clone; for Nouvel, it is change for the sake of change. As is often the case in Baudrillard’s writing, it is by looking at the singular, the exceptional, and the extreme that we gain the most profound insights into our culture.

In our virtually-emergent age of virtuality, Nouvel speculates that the mutations taking place in architecture and urban life will affect our very relationship to matter. In this discussion he brings us to understand that the move toward the virtual and the “noncity” illustrate both the nonmateriality of everything and that everything is now communication. The two thinkers conversation around the subjects of immateriality and virtuality is an engaging elaboration on the centrality of communication to the contemporary. For many inhabitants of the disciplined world of academe, the full implications of the hypermediated
society remain underanalyzed. Our genetically engineered clone culture is taking steps toward the production of headless humans for the harvest of replacement parts (as headless chickens are now produced for the fast-food harvest). Further, as we move, in the span of 20 years, “from sexuality without procreation, to procreation without sexuality” (p. 54), the dialogue between Nouvel and Baudrillard highlights the depth of the meaning of “communication” in the twenty-first century. Communications students in particular will find in this book an inspiring radicality of thought.

For Baudrillard, communication is at the heart of globalization and the future societies it is shaping. For him the fears of a dual world of information haves and have-nots have already been realized. We already inhabit a world of those who are connected to the wired world (the hyper minority) and those who are not. The wired portion of the global population tends toward increasing sophistication of knowledge while the majority live in its exclusion. Baudrillard points to a fundamental mutation in our understanding of this emergent society as yesterday’s class struggles are replaced by an intense form of discrimination that characterizes pyramidal globalization. Our future becomes present is one in which contact or clashes between information haves and have-nots are absent because the separate worlds they inhabit bypass the relations of force present in earlier forms of capitalism. This insight leads Baudrillard to view the increasing virtuality taking place in cities today as prophetic of our future. Baudrillard’s original and valuable post-Marxist analytic allows him to understand that terrorism has come to replace class conflict between the two orders in our information society. Given the separate worlds of the information haves and have-nots, terrorism may be the only form of communication remaining with the power to breech the divide and invade the screens of the haves with images of protest.

Baudrillard’s remarks on truth in architecture provide a clear elaboration of his thought on the subject for the past 20 years:

Can we speak of the truth in architecture? No, at least not in the sense that architecture would have truth as its goal or culmination. There are things that architecture wants to say, things it claims to accomplish, signify. Where is the radicality of architecture? What is it that constitutes the radicality of architecture? That’s how we should pose the question of truth in architecture. (p. 37)

Substitute either of communications, sociology, politics, history, or any other disciplined subject matter for “architecture” in the above passage, and an important step will have been taken toward what both Nouvel and Baudrillard demand of our understanding of the contemporary. Both make a significant effort to propel inquiry toward a speed at which an escape velocity from both positivist and Marxist-laden theoretical discourse may be reached.

The book begins with a perceptive and thoughtful introduction by K. Michael Hays and has been sensitively translated by Robert Bononno. It represents another significant contribution to the study of contemporary culture and communication by Baudrillard. While doing so it provides us with a look into the thoughts of an architect of global stature as Nouvel ponders questions of communication, freedom, and the future of his own profession. This is a book that highlights the importance of communications to our efforts to understand our contemporary circumstances. It is also a book that challenges communications studies to pass through its disciplinary limits. Therein lies a significant part of its strategic value.

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