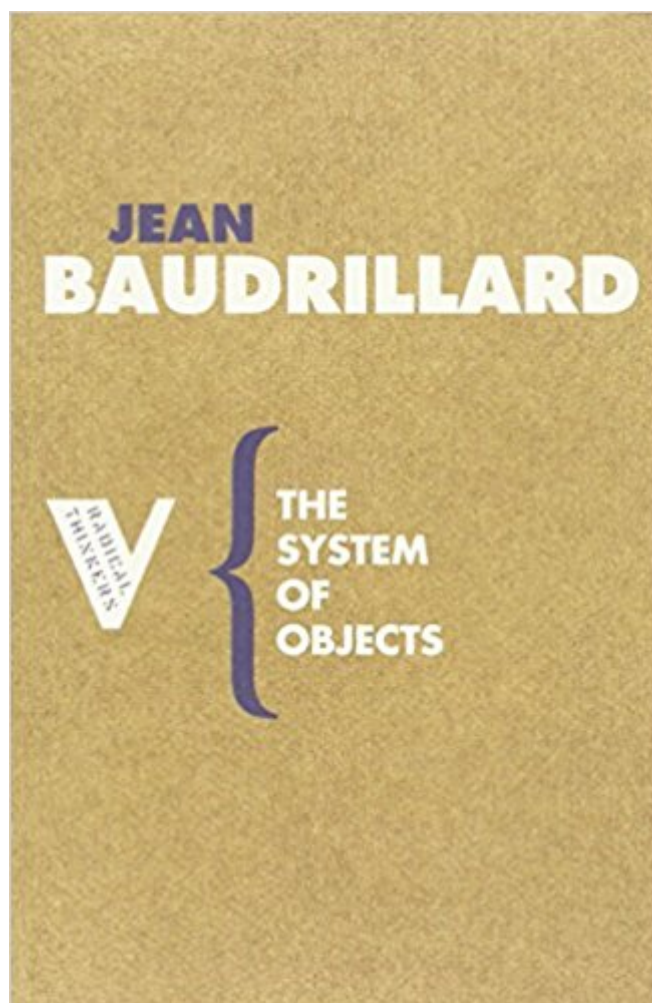


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The System Of Objects (Radical Thinkers)



Synopsis

The System of Objects is a tour de force—a theoretical letter-in-a-bottle tossed into the ocean in 1968, which brilliantly communicates to us all the live ideas of the day. Pressing Freudian and Saussurean categories into the service of a basically Marxist perspective, The System of Objects offers a cultural critique of the commodity in consumer society. Baudrillard classifies the everyday objects of the “new technical order” as functional, nonfunctional and metafunctional. He contrasts “modern” and “traditional” functional objects, subjecting home furnishing and interior design to a celebrated semiological analysis. His treatment of nonfunctional or “marginal” objects focuses on antiques and the psychology of collecting, while the metafunctional category extends to the useless, the aberrant and even the “schizofunctional.” Finally, Baudrillard deals at length with the implications of credit and advertising for the commodification of everyday life. The System of Objects is a tour de force of the materialist semiotics of the early Baudrillard, who emerges in retrospect as something of a lightning rod for all the live ideas of the day: Bataille’s political economy of “expenditure” and Mauss’s theory of the gift; Reisman’s lonely crowd and the “technological society” of Jacques Ellul; the structuralism of Roland Barthes in The System of Fashion; Henri Lefebvre’s work on the social construction of space; and last, but not least, Guy Debord’s situationist critique of the spectacle.

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Customer Reviews

“A sharp-shooting Lone Ranger of the post-Marxist left.” —New York

Times” “The most notorious intellectual celebrity to emerge from Paris since Roland Barthes and the most influential prophet of the media since Marshall McLuhan.”
magazine

Text: English (translation) Original Language: French --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Note: A number of 5-star ratings refer to delivery and condition of the book and/or do not indicate whether buyers read or understood the book. Indeed, it's a challenging read. In my case it was required for a class. The work encapsulates much 1960s thinking and French philosophy/world view. At first one wonders whether the confusion results from an unsuccessful English translation. Then, the sheer number of words employed for the delivery of a single concept serves to frustrate and delay comprehension. Run-on sentences take seemingly contradictory trajectories. There are many noteworthy insights and concepts worth pondering once they have been gleaned. However, the delivery system will stymie seekers for whom time is a precious commodity or who do not enjoy extreme verbosity.

This is a rather involved piece of work. I recommend it.

Hardly seems to have been written in 1968 (Year of publication) the writing still relevant. I especially appreciated the essays on Warhol and contemporary art in general, and the interview in which the author clarifies some of his most extreme published statements. (I've only read about half of this book so far)

The quality is very good! Thanks you so much!

Nice book. Worth it.

Shipping was timely, product was perfect! The book was for a class, so it is alright. A bit dated in spots, but a good deeper look at objects in our lives.

In 1968, Jean Baudrillard had spent more than a decade teaching sociology and translating German texts before he found his true vocation: using his vast store of erudition to critique what he saw of a

society that could not be adequately accounted for by orthodox production oriented Marxist tenets. Where Marx saw a product built by human needs, he saw that product only in terms of the interaction between worker and capital used to roll that thing off the conveyer belt. Where Baudrillard would see that same thing, he would see not the mechanics of manufacturing that thing but the utility it had and how the consumer would react emotionally and viscerally to possessing it. The term "consumer" had a special resonance for Baudrillard. Most contemporary theorists used it mostly to designate one who purchases a product and pretty much uses it as the manufacturer intended. Along came Baudrillard to expand the definition to include the "why" and the "how" one consumes the object. What needs does consuming that thing satisfy in the user? What lengths will a user go to hoard multiple copies? And most important, what is the interaction between designer and manufacturer to produce a product that will subtly shift the consumer from viewing that product from its traditional orthodox use to an unorthodox use that imparts to the consumer a driving sense to view, use, and ultimately hoard it so as to ensure a continuing profit for all concerned in the manufacturing process? In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard combined theories from Saussure, Barthes, Bataille, and other counter-culture critics to account for the then burgeoning discipline of consumer science modification. The world of low-tech objects and commonplace gizmos were to Baudrillard the arena in which Marx's triangle of capital, worker, and process had to give way for a more sophisticated method to determine why consumers buy and use as they do. After all, who looks at mirrors in any way except as a reflecting device? Well, for Baudrillard, a mirror spoke volumes about the social pecking order of its user. The more cumbersome, the more ornate a mirror was, the more its affluent owner prized it. Further, to capture one's image in a mirror was a most ephemeral synchronic affair. The next step was to retain that image for a longer diachronic period. Thus, photo albums (equally ornate and pricey) become the pseudo-mirror. The "System" of the title was Baudrillard's vision of Marx transformed taking objects on a journey that begins in the objective world of calculable functionality and terminating somewhere in the incalculable world of human psychology in which the Yellow Brick Road of consumerism swirls ever outward never reaching completion.

Some contemporary French philosophy is a fascinating and invigorating mix of psychology, sociology, semiotics and, dare one say it, poetry. In the English speaking world, Marshall McLuhan is probably the philosopher whose style is most similar to this first, 1968, book by the now well known Jean Baudrillard. What is the book about? In a sense it is about the meaning of low tech everyday objects, and thus it is also about the psycho-sociology of our technology. Take mirrors, for

example, which were frankly disappearing as an element of interior decoration when Baudrillard wrote his book. Yet for years, mirrors were an important fixture of well-to-do bourgeois interiors; they were opulent, expensive objects which in Baudrillard's words permitted "...the self-indulgent bourgeois individual to exercise his privilege --reproduce his own image and revel in his possessions". Family portraits and photographs represent diachronic mirrors of the family, and thus played a similar narcissistic role in decoration. Baudrillard analyses clocks, lighting, glass, seating, antiques and the drive to automate and miniaturize gadgets and tools, and always comes up with provocative, sometimes maddening, insights into modern society and one's place in it --and after all what is philosophy for but to make you think? There is a brilliant and probably timeless exploration of the passion of collecting and leads up nicely to what the bulk of the book is devoted to: the study of systems of objects (one of the main chapters is aptly titled "The Socio-Ideological System of Objects and Their Consumption"). What do we yearn to express through technology? What is it that fascinates us about robots? Why is there such a proliferation of automatism, accessory features, inessential features to the point where an object's dysfunctions are as important as its functions? Baudrillard acknowledges his debt to some of Lewis Mumford's ideas, and deplores with him that too often we try to solve problems by building a machine (perhaps nowadays we would tend to develop software, or in Baudrillard's terms simulate) and thus not only fall wide of the mark but also reveal clear signs of social ineptitude and paralysis. Fashion, consumption, technology are intertwined themes in modern society, feeding off each other and leading to a world that is at once systematized, fragile and baroque, in the sense that the proliferation of forms seems to be more important than mining for substance. It is interesting to compare some of these insights with a more recent book by another French philosopher, Gilles Lipovetsky, on fashion in modern societies ("The empire of the ephemeral", 1987). The book ends by looking at the role credit and advertising play in the consumption of systems of objects, and thus completes what the book's jacket indicates is "a cultural critique of the commodity in consumer society". Baudrillard is a humanist critic of technology and consumer society and uses psychoanalytical ideas as weapons to grapple with his subject. The book is by turns, infuriating, keen, stimulating but in the end one feels that, curiously, it lacks a certain depth; it plays with mirrors and is content with catching the light and obtaining the occasional blinding flash; but sometimes that the criticisms seem a little too one-sided or perhaps I simply prefer more constructive criticism. Still, the book is a tour-de-force, and I feel that the translator, James Benedict, did a fine job with a difficult text.

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