

Table of Contents

Please Follow Me 1

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By Stewart Home

Stewart Home meets artist Annabel Frearson, postmodern ingenue, chatroom conceptualist and creator of BaudriR

[IMAGE] *BaudriR* charts the live reproduction in internet chat rooms of the Jean Baudrillard book *In The Shadow Of The Silent Majorities*. According to Baudrillard, the strength of the masses lies in their silence and their ability to neutralise critique. Accepting Baudrillard on his own terms, cyber-artist Annabel Frearson has typed Baudrillard out word for word into chat rooms where the fragmented structure of the online ‘interactions’ precludes coherent expression and juxtaposes Baudrillard’s high-flown ‘anti-theory’ with clichés and inanities, producing truly hyperreal effects. Baudrillard is largely ignored as the conversation ranges across politics and religion, but still manages to hinge largely on sex. Frearson’s *BaudriR* project very cleverly reveals the limits of Baudrillard’s theoretical work, and as such undermines him in ways that are unimaginable to those – such as Christopher Norris – who have launched frontal attacks on post-modernism. I was intrigued, and arranged to meet Frearson in Messrs C, a coffee shop opposite Farringdon tube station. I’d jotted down a few questions in a note book, and began with the most obvious of them.

‘How did you get the idea for this project?’ I asked after purchasing a cappuccino.

‘I wanted to learn more about Baudrillard.’

‘So why did you chose to work with *In The Shadow Of The Silent Majorities*?’

‘It was the only book I’d read by Baudrillard, I read it when I was at college, and I had a copy at home.’

‘What are your opinions about Baudrillard’s claims to have broken with Marxism in works such as *The Mirror Of Production*?’ I enquired.

‘Your question seems to imply Baudrillard used to be a Marxist, I really know very little about him and have never heard of *The Mirror Of Production*. Tell me about his involvement in Marxism.’

‘Baudrillard was Henri Lefebvre’s assistant for a time.’

‘Who is Henri Lefebvre?’

‘He was a leading Parisian communist intellectual, well known for his sociological interest in everyday life. As well as working with Lefebvre, Baudrillard also had a flirtation with Maoism. Despite his claims that he has broken with Marxism, what Baudrillard actually does is invert the communist critique of commodity fetishism in which objects take on the appearance of subjects and subjects – men and women – are treated as things. He switches around the positive and negative signs in Marx’s analysis of capitalism, while simultaneously demonstrating his inability to move beyond it. Of course, given what Baudrillard has to say about history turning back on itself in *The Illusion Of The End*, he arms himself against criticisms of this type by incorporating them into his theory.’

‘I don’t know anything about this.’

'But that's incredible,' I exclaimed. 'I've been reading Baudrillard for nearly twenty years and you seem to be telling me that you've grasped all the issues he raises quite intuitively, and that you've done so working from a tiny fragment of his extensive output. You seem to have arrived at positions remarkably similar to my own, but without putting in the long and arduous hours of reading and thinking I've dedicated to this task.'

'As I've already said, I did this because I wanted to learn more about Baudrillard, I really know very little about him. I found it arduous enough retyping his text.'

'So now you've got the *BaudriR* project up on your web site, what else do you intend to do with it?'

'I want to find a publisher who'll put it out as a book.'

'But that's impossible!' I cried. 'This is a massive project and reproducing it in book form would be very expensive. It's unlikely that any publisher with the money to do it as a book would touch it, because it so blatantly infringes copyright.'

'I don't think copyright is a problem, Baudrillard's writing constitutes only a small part of what I've created, it's broken up by a mass of other people's comments and there are errors in my transcription. The question I'm asking is who really owns this text?'

'Of course, from a Socratic point of view, what you've done is completely valid, but the international laws concerning intellectual property are very strict. The copyright status of the text you've used will be quite complicated. *In The Shadow Of The Silent Majorities* is translated from French and consists of essays from a number of sources. There is Baudrillard's original copyright, then that will be held through at least one French publisher, on top of which Semiotext(e) will have licensed the copyright in English and their licence is clearly non-exclusive because other American presses have published parts of the text in other forms and other translations, and then there's the question of the copyright on the translation.'

'I wrote to Columbia University to ask if I could use the book, but I didn't hear back from them.'

'That's because Jim Fleming who runs Semiotext(e), and Columbia University who he used to work with, had disagreements over some of the stuff he was publishing and got divorced. This, of course, makes the copyright situation even more complex. Fleming is keeping the old Semiotext(e) books in print, but it seems to me that Columbia might legitimately lay at least partial claim to the copyright on this particular translation.'

'But surely they won't mind that I've used the text?'

'To persuade any commercial publisher to touch your project, you'd actually have to clear the copyright, which looks to me like it would be very difficult. I thought that was one of the great things about what you'd done, that you'd so flagrantly contravened the laws of copyright. I'm also curious about these America Online chat rooms that you've used to generate the text that fragments *In The Shadow Of The Silent Majorities*, since it occurred to me that as the carrier of these services, AOL might claim copyright on what goes on within them. I haven't checked this out, but if anyone is able to claim copyright on what appears in chat rooms, it would seem more likely that it would be the carrier rather than the individual participants. It would be rather amusing to see someone like AOL try to claim copyright on *BaudriR*.'

'I wouldn't know about that, I haven't thought about it.'

'The copyright status of text generated in specific chat rooms might be dealt with in their terms and conditions of use. Have you looked at these? I haven't because I've never used a chat room.'

'You've never used a chat room?'

'No.'

'I find them fascinating, I log on thinking I'll just go into one quickly, and then I spend hours and hours with it.'

'What you reproduce from chat rooms is side-splittingly funny in the context of detourning Baudrillard, but it is also utterly banal.'

'But the banality is its fascination.'

The conversation could have gone on in this way for hours. However, having finished my coffee, I decided to leave. Despite allowing a few weeks to pass between interviewing Frearson and transcribing what took place, I'm still not sure whether she was self-consciously performing the role Baudrillard had allotted the masses in his theoretical work, or if she'd blindly stumbled into the part. My guess is both and neither, in a(n) (un)knowing postmodern sort of way. *BaudriR* is already a cult among a number of my acquaintances who regularly get high on theory. I can't imagine a single one of them believing me when I tell them Frearson claimed to know nothing of Baudrillard beyond *In The Shadow Of The Silent Majorities*. The 'truth', of course, doesn't matter – whatever way you look at it, *BaudriR* is a triumph.

Stewart Home is the author of a number of works of cultural commentary, as well as several novels – including *Cunt and Blow Job* – that have been both praised and condemned as “avant-garde pornography”. He is also a practicing artist. Stewart Home Society
[<http://www.stewarthomesociety.org>]

BaudriR: [<http://www.baudrir.com>]

>> Illustration by Luise Vormittag