NOTES AND CORRESPONDENCE

Jean Baudrillard, 1929-2007. We cannot know how future sociologists and philosophers will treat the work of Jean Baudrillard, who died in Paris last March of cancer. But future sf should have a place reserved for him. Baudrillard belongs among those brilliant iconoclastic thinkers (a group that might include N.F. Fyodorov, J.D. Bernal, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Marvin Minsky, and Donna Haraway, among others) whose philosophical speculations open up portals leading directly to sf, and to viewing the world with science-fictional eyes.

Of all the young Marxist Turks who were pushed into the poetry of theory by the failed revolutionary utopianism of May 1968, Baudrillard was the one to whom mass media and sf were most interesting. Perhaps this was because Baudrillard, virtually alone among the Parisian luminaries, was the first in a family of farmers and provincial civil servants to attend university, and one of the very few who did not attend the École Normale. (As he told the story, had he not been discovered by Henri Lefebvre, one of the most original Marxist thinkers of the century, he would have remained "un petit prof' d'allemand.") It was as if Baudrillard, frumpy, modest, and as poker-faced as Buster Keaton, truly did not care about the consolations of philosophy and textuality after his illumination (already hinted at in his "Requiem for the Media" in 1972) that capitalism's victory had been more total than anyone could imagine. The Situationist/hippie/Frankfurt School dread of being co-opted by the Establishment was mere sentimental squirming by comparison. Baudrillard presented a world in which all communication, including critique itself, had become part of an unfettered process of a techno-metastatic production of value, the hyperinflation of meaning and signs that he would articulate in his most familiar works as hyperreality and simulation.

Baudrillard was distinct among his Parisian theorist-contemporaries, most of whom were brilliant stylists within their own refined traditions, in that he was always essentially a literary mind. His first published works were translations of Hölderlin and Brecht, an unlikely duo whose presence can be detected in many of Baudrillard's later ideas. Although he began his critical career with intricate more-than-Marxist critiques of Marxism, *The Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972) and *The Mirror of Production* (1973), he gradually shifted into a style that was more ludic and performative, a change that many of his readers did not appreciate. Once he recognized the implications of his theory that capitalism had broken free of the constraints of representation and production, he drew the conclusions. If the system of simulation makes even critique into a reified commodity, then the boundaries and distances between theory and the object world are just, to use William Gibson's phrase, "consensual hallucinations." From that point on, Baudrillard ceased trying to wedge open a way to see through hypercapitalism with the help of critique and began what he named the "fatal strategy" of following its development to its full, apocalyptic, literally absurd conclusions. Those who found Baudrillard's

ideas depressing, or incapacitating, or infuriating, betrayals of this or that school of thought or of human dignity *tout court*, treated his work as if it were somehow answerable, as if his ideas could be detached entirely from his writing. That was no more true of him than it was of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Serres, or Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Baudrillard avowed himself to be a pataphysical writer in the tradition of Alfred Jarry's Doctor Faustroll, who freely mashed up all the authoritative technical discourses of his age into delirious metaphors—communication as metastasis, values achieving escape velocity, the satellization of the earth, history as leukemia—that could only end in paradox and oxymoron.

Baudrillard was understandably attracted to sf, but he was not very well-versed in it. He invoked Philip K. Dick to bolster his notion of the simulacrum, but it doesn't really work (as a future article in *SFS* by Jorge Martins Rosa will detail, Dick and Baudrillard had fundamentally different ideas about simulation and simulacra). Ironically, the misprision came around from the opposite direction when *The Matrix* (1999) gave his words to Morpheus and hollowed out *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) for Neo to stash his blackware in. Baudrillard later noted that the Wachowskis, the film's directors, had confused his notion of simulation with Platonic illusion. After the first film, he was invited to collaborate and declined. As he put it in a 2003 interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*: "*The Matrix* is a bit like a movie that the Matrix could have made about the Matrix." His true soulmates in sf were the borderline pataphysicians and surrealists, J.G. Ballard and William S. Burroughs, with whom he shared the pose of a deadpan witness to total meltdown. While orthodox Marxists and moralists clucked their tongues, Ballard praised *America* (1986) in *SFS* 18.3 (1991) as an "an absolutely brilliant piece of writing, probably the most sharply clever piece of writing since Swift—brilliancies and jewels of insight in every paragraph—an intellectual Aladdin's cave" (329). Most of Baudrillard's critics resembled the legendary Bishop who, tossing a copy of *Gulliver's Travels* onto the fire, opined "personally, I think it's a pack of lies."

SFS owes much to Baudrillard. After publishing the first English translations of his essays on sf and Ballard's *Crash* (1973), around which we built 1991's special issue on "Science Fiction and Postmodernism," it became clear to us, as to many younger readers of cyberpunk and Ballardian post-Agenda sf (to use John Clute's phrase), that Baudrillard had opened up a space in which to think in new ways about sf and the culture dominated by techno-media. Phenomena that made it hard for a science-fiction writer to keep up with reality became comprehensible, even predictable, via the concepts of simulation and symbolic economy. Baudrillard's thinking remained to the end inspired by the spirit of sf as metatext of tropes, perspectives, and above all, fictions. His most provocative essays, such as "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place" (1991) and "Requiem for the Twin Towers" (2002), infuriated many righteous folks who did not read them. Read as sf about contemporary war and terrorism, they are uncanny reminders of Ballard's axiom in his preface to *Crash* (1973) and elsewhere that "the fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality."

Baudrillard posed as an agent provocateur, a nihilist, a terrorist, a fatalist, and many readers took him at his word. But taken as a writer and visionary ironist, he was also a most compassionate, witty, and humane affirmer of the imagination's ability to survive—and perhaps even comprehend—a world without compassion, through seductive fictions that the Matrix cannot retell. With Baudrillard, we have lost a great poet-theorist, a great interpreter of terrorism and media, and even (dare I say it?) a most sympathetic interpreter of our age. It's only right that he be given a place on the flying island of sf.—**ICR**

Race in SF and John Wyndham's Color-Schemed Future. There are six references in *SFS*'s "Afrofuturism" issue (34.2 [July 2007]) to the general assumption of a "color-blind future" in genre sf. This phrase is a catchy metaphoric way of describing what seems to have first been pointed to in the second edition of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (St Martin's, 1993). In their "Politics" entry, Peter Nicholls and Brian Stableford maintain that "the tendency of genre sf has been to ignore the issue [of racism] or sanctimoniously to take for granted its eventual disappearance" (947). An important exact opposite example is provided by what might be termed the "color-schemed future" of John Beynon's (i.e., John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris's) "The Living Lies," written in 1939. JBH, to use the initials of the name he went by in his daily life, was as progressive in his sf with regard to race issues as with regard to feminist and sexual ones.

JBH wrote "The Living Lies" with the impending war urgently in mind, but he had to wait until that war was over to achieve publication. In the UK, presumably with the aim of gaining as wide an audience as possible, he had submitted what he described, in his self-deprecating way, as this "too tractarian" piece in 1939 to *The News-Chronicle* (on June 7), to *Reynold's News* (on June 12), and to *The Daily Herald* (on June 29) as a possible serial, all without success. He sent "The Living Lies" to his American agent, Otis Adlebert Kline, on July 11, 1939, but Kline failed to place it. Seven calamitous years later, it appeared in the UK as the lead story in the October 1946 second issue of *New Worlds: A Fiction Magazine of the Future* (2-20). To the best of my knowledge, it has only been reprinted once. It appeared in the US magazine *Other Worlds Science Stories* (November 1950). Because it has apparently not been anthologized, it is not well known. But anyone now planning an anthology of racial issues in sf should include JBH's trail-blazing direct critique. No earlier such examples of genre sf come to my mind. Researchers will no doubt thoroughly check for other early examples of such directness. Stories involving non-human aliens that might be interpreted as human others are by definition indirect.

"The Living Lies" is an ingenious postcolonial, satiric attack on skin-color prejudice. It takes place in the future on Venus, an Earth colony where the native inhabitants are the miscegenate descendants of the original colonists from Earth and the original human Venusians who have since died out from infection. The new natives are variously colored green, red, black, or white. The whites are dominant and the other color groups are also the victims of color prejudices