Book Review/Compte rendu

Gerry Coulter, *Jean Baudrillard: From the Ocean to the Desert, or the Poetics of Radicality*. Skyland, NC: Inter-Theory, 2012, 190 pp., $22.00 paper (978-0-9789902-4-4)

Many readers of Jean Baudrillard forget that he began his career teaching German and was a prolific translator into French of Weiss, Brecht, and Marx and Engels among others. Gerry Coulter has not forgotten the vocation of this "prehistoric" Baudrillard. The most provocative insight of *Jean Baudrillard: From the Ocean to the Desert, or the Poetics of Radicality*, is that while teaching high-school German he was "chosen to translate Hölderlin" (p. 36). While Coulter has not written an intellectual biography, his use of understudied incidents and contexts aid his interpretation of Baudrillard's greatest insights. Coulter then gathers together Baudrillard's scattered references to Hölderlin in his works and from them builds a case for a shared poetic sensibility. This does not entail that Baudrillard is a romantic. Rather, in Baudrillard's case this sensibility is linked to his theory of the resolution of the world in the reversibility of events, whose germinal form is found in Hölderlin. However, the Hölderlin that Baudrillard produces is "anagrammatized" Coulter explains (p. 49), referring to the gathering of scattered traces of partial signs to constitute a counter-message that undermines the obvious message. Coulter provides a new route into Hölderlin beyond the beaten path of Heidegger. His efforts are an advance on the suggestive clues about Baudrillard's beginnings dropped by Mike Gane in the early 1990s.

Another figure whose influence on Baudrillard — though Coulter dislikes this term — looms large is Roland Barthes. This is a complex relationship that began with Barthes' role as academic advisor to Baudrillard, but is worked through in terms of how Barthes' views on writing as transgressive, pleasurable, and gamemanship, dovetailed with those of Baudrillard. Coulter does not dwell on the obvious correspondence between the early semio-structural books of Baudrillard which are heirs to Barthes' own theoretical statements on semiology, fashion, and narrative. Instead, he focuses on the relationship between language and meaning. Both thinkers struggle to escape from meaning but in different ways. In a probing section dealing with this issue, Coulter shows how they brush shoulders on meaning's frightening terroristic dimension (p. 22), with Barthes pursuing unique concepts like signifiers without signifieds,

and empty signs; whereas Baudrillard pursues somewhat relentlessly meaning's own objective undoing of itself. Baudrillard's antipositivism, disdain for truth and proof for the sake of enigma and the charm of appearances seems more extreme or, as Coulter nicely puts it, "pressed outward" (p. 26), than Barthes' recourse to "the preemption of meaning" in his book on Japan, or destabilization of meaning in general. Coulter is mostly interested in what critics call the "second Barthes" who turned his back on method for reflective, aphoristic essays and hedonistic style. This corresponds to Baudrillard's direction since the 1980s, at least since his book *America*. Indeed, Coulter considers *America* to be pivotal, and Janus-faced: "those who have difficulty taking Baudrillard seriously may have had the misfortune of making their first read of his work *America*…." (p. 65); yet, "*America* is the testing ground for some of the ideas and the one great thought Baudrillard has been encountering for a number of years" (p. 66).

The "one great thought" in question is reversibility ("the idea that all systems lead to their own demise" [p. 51]), and Coulter maps its emergence in Baudrillard's books over the decades, in addition to delineating its intersections with challenge, duel, seduction, implosion, counter-gift, fatal and object-oriented theory, and evil. These concepts are strategically deployed with a number of ends: to further systemic collapse; to carve out singular spaces of unorganized resistance; to refuse the choice between meaninglessness and meaningfulness. It is not that meaning does not exist at all, it is just that it is restricted. Yet philosophy, Baudrillard argues, insists on crashing onto the rocks of meaning. Coulter's explanation of reversibility is lucid and obeys its own constraint of not stepping beyond demonstrating consistency into unifying Baudrillard's thought once and for all.

Revisiting Baudrillard's critique of the unanalyzed productivism of Marxism, Coulter observes this failure as a mirror of capitalism from which there is no escape for the Left. However, he also alludes in passing to an important point about Baudrillard's "political detachment" prior to May '68. This caused a rift to open between Baudrillard and many European intellectuals on the Left that was not reparable within Baudrillard's lifetime. Only recently have Italian postautonomists like Franco Berardi and Maurizio Lazzarato given credit to Baudrillard for his trenchant analyses of the global economic system and our acculturation into credit/debt. This issue warrants more attention.

Coulter also chronicles a number of dust-ups in which Baudrillard was involved — with Susan Sontag over Sarajevo is the most notable. It seems that Baudrillard did not much appreciate Sontag's directorial efforts with a local troupe in staging *Waiting for Godot* in 1993 as Sarajevo

was under Serbian fire and the UN looked on. He considered Sontag's actions window dressing and complicity in genocide; she thought he was an idiot. The journalistic flavour of Coulter's approach seeks a larger context of explaining the consequences of not taking seriously Baudrillard's provocative pronouncements.

The larger question begged is: how does one account for the current quiet in the Baudrillard scene? While Coulter's accomplishment in founding *The International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* is notable, what was once upon a time a raging scene has become quiescent since the provocative analyses of 9/11 and Baudrillard's death on March 6, 2007.

Coulter cycles back to the Barthes-Baudrillard relationship through photography. He presents convincing readings of a number of Baudrillard's photographs, linking how they work with theory of reversion (the object's seductiveness) and the "inversion of vision" (p. 137). Baudrillard's "enigmatic" photographs engage dismal and gloomy affects, Coulter maintains, revealing how the Barthesean punctum as personal shows itself in a number of them. Through additional readings of novels and cinema, Coulter explores how these media contribute to today's "uncertainty revolution" (p. 175) with regard to the status of history and the real.

Finally, we reach the desert, one of Baudrillard's favourite haunts. Coulter explains why Baudrillard loved deserts: they respect the inhuman; they have poetical and chimerical elements beyond the real; they exterminate meaning; in them identity evaporates (pp. 176–77). Deserts are, in short, places of freedom. Religions have attempted to deny the desert's sovereignty, Coulter reminds us, because they are "the earth's anti-prayer to the cosmos" (p. 179). The final desert is the cemetery in which Baudrillard is interred.

Traditional social scientific interpretations of Baudrillard tend to downplay or in some cases dismiss the poetic resolutions and pataphysical delicacies of his theorizing. That is, the dizzying heights of arch position-taking, souped-up anthropology, and theorizing as far beyond metaphysics as metaphysics is beyond physics. The value of Coulter's book is that he refuses to be drawn into arguments about empirical evidence, criticality, intentionality. Instead, he pursues the complex conceptualizations that permitted Baudrillard to radically transfigure the world through his writings and photography. This book is for Baudrillard without regrets.

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