

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JEAN BAUDRILLARD, *The Conspiracy of Art*. Edited by Sylvère Lotringer. New York: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2005, 246 p., index.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD, *Utopia Deferred: Writings for Utopie (1967-1978)*. Edited by Sylvère Lotringer and translated by Stuart Kendall. New York: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2006, 328 p.

Baudrillard was to late 20th century art (and sociology) what Luther was to early 16th century Catholicism. Ever suspicious of culture (and the culture of promotion), Baudrillard sought an experience of art as free as possible from the mediation of curators and gallery owners (and others with a vested interest in art). We may consider it a contemporary effort to access the text as free as possible from the priesthood. In 1996 Baudrillard infuriated the art world by lambasting what he saw as a “conspiracy of art.” The fact that so few in the art world (which had courted him since 1983) sought to defend themselves from Baudrillard’s claim only served to make his point more strongly. “The Conspiracy of Art” is the first of twenty-one essays in this volume which is a significant collection of Baudrillard’s writings on art and culture. This book makes an excellent text for introducing sociology students to Baudrillard’s thought. It may also occupy a powerful presence in seminars on the sociology of art, if pedagogues are up to the challenge. The papers in it date from his “Pataphysics” of 1952, through his “War Porn” of 2004. Three of the six interviews included in the book have not appeared previously in English. An interesting contemporary aspect of this book is that it simulates (in print) three essays previously available only in the virtual: “Dust Breeding” appeared in *CTheory* (www.Ctheory.com); “War Porn” and “The Matrix Revisited” appeared in the *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* (www.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies).

In his 1952 essay “Pataphysics” Baudrillard said that “the pataphysic mind is the nail in the tire” (213). He was only 23 when he wrote this essay but it introduces many concepts he would work with for the remainder of his life: paroxysm, metastatic culture, and the problematization of reality. We also meet Baudrillard’s Stucco Angel for the first time. Pataphysics is “the science of imaginary solutions” and Baudrillard’s imagination was his most important attribute as a writer. I believe it was his pataphysical orientation that provided him with a unique take on our implosive culture. Nine of the essays are from the 1990’s and seven others since the millennium. The unifying elements to the essays in this collection are Baudrillard’s distaste for writing which aims at making truth and meaning

(in art and elsewhere), and our tiresome subservience to the concept of the real. The latter being, in my mind, the conspiracy of academe.

“The Implosion of Beaubourg” (1978) likens the Centre Pompidou in Paris to a shopping mall with its promise of an indefinite supply of culture. The public, much to Baudrillard’s delight, seem to have another purpose for this grand incinerator of art – of every 20,000 entries, 18,500 take a miss on the museum and go only to the roof for the view of Paris. Beaubourg was an object of fascination for Baudrillard because in it he saw a metaphor for the saturation taking place at every level of our culture (including power). It is the point beyond which our culture cannot go, not unlike star clusters whose density reaches phenomenal proportions and soon after implode. Two essays from the 1980’s – “Viral Economy” and “Towards the Vanishing Point of Art” – further develop Baudrillard’s understanding of implosion. Our “transeconomic” circumstance (not the economy as we thought we knew but one in an uncertain transition) is not unlike that experienced by primitive cultures. The circulation of art is important here for Baudrillard as he notes how it increases in value merely by changing hands – not unlike the kula cycle of symbolic exchange. Thus the object of art, as the absolute object of our culture, approaches the vanishing point – the destruction of the commodity by its very value. “Reckless speculation” on artworks serves only to “parody the art market.” Art thus enters into the “vertigo of obscenity” in which the art object becomes “a newly victorious fetish” (not the sad, alienated fetish). The art object is one of Baudrillard’s main entry points into an understanding that the economy has reached a kind of escape velocity from everyday life – circulating the globe as so much of it does now – via satellite.

Andy Warhol, Baudrillard tells us quite correctly, attempted to free us from aesthetics and art. This is also Baudrillard’s project in his photography and writing. “Radical Thought” (originally published in Baudrillard’s tour de force *The Perfect Crime*) argues that thinking which has as its goal a resemblance to truth is of no value – it is the “immeasurable divergences that separate it from truth” which interest him (162). For Baudrillard, the world is given to us as enigmatic and unintelligible – there is no reason then why we should not attempt to make it, in our writing or in our art, more enigmatic and more unintelligible (see Coulter and Reid in the *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, January 2007). This takes us to the core of Baudrillard’s dissatisfaction with the art world – art’s task is to help us cope with our vital illusion – the fact that we do not know the real, merely the appearances behind which it hides. All good art for Baudrillard (and Francis Bacon is an example) appreciates this vital illusion which encompasses our existence. In recent years art has become entangled with notions of reality and attempting to think the real (89). Baudrillard observes that so much contemporary art incorporates waste and notions of worthlessness. This is ironic because art that has lost illusion is truly worthless. He notes how it is interesting that art and its market thrive today to the very extent that they decompose. Art is also an important part of the university which is itself in ruins – and which can – still do a lot of damage by rotting (*Simulacra and Simulation*, 149-150). For Baudrillard, these are today’s charnel houses of culture and simulacra (97).

Artists share in the blame for the degraded position of art in contemporary society. This is the case with films which know neither illusion nor allusion, tumbling instead into the hyper-technical realm of computer generated special effects. Filmmakers and other artists often promise us that their art of special effects is more real than the real – a concept so banal that even television (cinema's retarded little brother) can understand it. For Baudrillard, we face a circumstance in which reality has become the final illusion of our culture. The Matrix was, for Baudrillard, a film without the slightest glimmer of irony and the kind of film he said "the matrix would make about the matrix" (202). Reality TV merely confuses existence with its double – the latest episode in what is, for Baudrillard, the catastrophe of television.

Baudrillard holds no nostalgia for aesthetics – he finds it all too ready to force everything into art (the 150 year old hostile takeover of photography by art is an example). If art is dying today, it is because there is too much of it – just one more element of implosion – the culture of "Too Much is Too Much." Baudrillard comes to the art world as Marcus Aurelius's Danube peasant came to Rome: "someone who knows nothing but suspects something is wrong" (66). Baudrillard, the Parisian peasant, continued to work to the end as the nail in the tire of the art world.

At the end of this collection I am left wondering if the sociology of art has the courage to incorporate these writings into its evolving cannon. I will wager that it does not. If I am right, we will see that it too has been an important part of the conspiracy of art.

Utopia Deferred is comprised of twenty-six essays written by Baudrillard between 1967 and 1978. It is the most important collection of older writings by Baudrillard to come to press since Gary Genosko's *The Uncollected Baudrillard* (2001). Six of these essays appeared in Genosko's collection and seven others appeared as longer chapters in six of Baudrillard's books written during this time. The first paper in the collection is an interview with Jean-Louis Voileau "On Utopie." In it we see that Baudrillard found a certain joy in writing for *Utopie* but in the end he always preferred to work alone. Indeed, his only co-authored book, save for a short addendum to Sophie Calle's *Suite Vénitienne*, is his last book: *Les exilés du dialogue* (Editions Galilée, 2005) with Enrique Valiente Noailles.

Overall, this collection presents the challenge Baudrillard made to sociology (and the university more broadly conceived) in the 1960's and 70's. That challenge, which Baudrillard himself did not especially like, but did embrace, was the recognition of the end of the Real, Truth, Meaning (I use capitals to refer to the universal application of these terms). Certainly the real, truth, and meaning (lower case) are useful concepts if understood as existing along a local and restricted horizon. If sociology (and academic thought more generally) had, forty years ago, taken up the challenge which has become instead Baudrillard's challenge, we can imagine a much more radical and relevant place of thought than the broken and disciplined

university we find today. Our failure in this regard led to Baudrillard's increasing dissatisfaction, and eventual rupture, with the university. He developed a kind of disdain for most of academe exceeded only by his disdain for politics.

The articles written for *Utopie* also set down much of Baudrillard's challenge that was to continue to work its way through his books for another three decades (the end of dialectics, the terrorism of the social, the media and the silent majorities, DNA and the metaphysics of the code, the pornography of consumer culture, otherness, transeconomics and the transpolitical). Time and again, through his writing, we are left to wonder what other future might have existed for the university after the 1960's. We speculate about what a truly radical sociology might have become had the faculty of the 1970's had the audacity to mount the challenge that beckoned.

Here in Canada, as in Baudrillard's France, the challenge went largely unanswered. Baudrillard's ideas as expressed in the writings for *Utopie* are, in their own way, a memorial for a kind of university that never stood a chance. The failure to build a radical university in the 1970's left it defenseless for the corporate incursions of the 1980's and 1990's. This assault has produced a domesticated kind of academic, much more conservative than his/her 1950's counterpart, despite the outward appearance of what passes for radical politics today. Radical politics itself (such as feminism or Marxism) have largely been reduced to a longing for the law.

We have today the university we deserve – a kind of temporary shelter, job fair, and surveillance machine for a distinct age segment of the middle classes. It is an institution all too happy to turn itself inside out to meet the latest commercial caprice. Today's most exceptional faculty strain under the yolk of state granting agencies and ethics boards – two of the most sophisticated apparatuses of social control ever invented. As highly disciplined creatures, academics themselves were central to the founding of these machineries. We believe in the institutions we inhabit at our peril. Wherever radical thought is to find a home in the 21st century, very little of it will be at the university.

The university is in ruins. Is its worst damage still to be done by rotting or is it already well on the way to becoming a great web-café? Baudrillard's "art" was pressing us to ask precisely these kinds of questions and in them his "hope" remained with us to the end. But as Baudrillard knew very well – ours is a period in which hope is not a very lucid idea.

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