

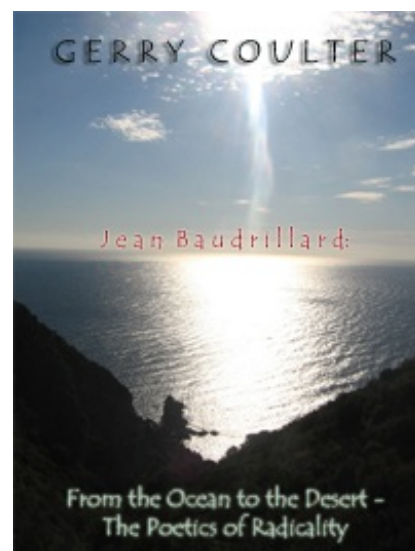
Book Review: Jean Baudrillard: From the Ocean to the Desert, or the Poetics of Radicality

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Straightforward, combative, and radical with regard to both contents and method, this book considers Jean Baudrillard's contributions to the literature on theory as poetry. With lashings of quotes from the works of this unique intellectual voice and thought-provoking takes on Baudrillard's ideas, the book will certainly appeal to many intrigued readers, finds Thorsten Botz-Bornstein.

Jean Baudrillard: From the Ocean to the Desert, or the Poetics of Radicality. Gerry Coulter. Intertheory Press. December 2012.

Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) was a French philosopher, sociologist and media theorist representative of post-structuralist thought. He is most famous for his theory of simulation in contemporary culture as well as for his theorizations of terrorism, both of which combined led him to the formulation of the provocative statement that “the Gulf War never took place.” Baudrillard’s suggestive and at times poetical style made him popular beyond academic circles, but also gained him the reputation of being a not very rigorous and scientific thinker. Gerry Coulter’s book sheds light on these problems and shows that, in spite of a language that can appear untypical within academic discourse, Baudrillard’s arguments remain sound.



Coulter teaches sociology at Bishop’s University in Canada and is the editor-in-chief of the *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, a journal which publishes serious and comprehensive scholarship on Baudrillard and his reception. This certainly makes Coulter one of the main authorities in the field. Still the book is not technical at all, avoids any jargon, and should be interesting for students and scholars from all fields of the humanities.

Coulter reads Baudrillard through Baudrillard’s own concepts and convictions, which are above all, his idea of theory as poetry and the reversibility of systems. Baudrillard is established by Coulter as a poet suspicious of empirical methods. Such accounts of Baudrillard might reaffirm Baudrillard’s reputation as a “non-serious” theorist, but still I am glad that Coulter spells out Baudrillard’s position so clearly because it allows us to reflect it against a larger spectrum of contemporary problems. The book is straightforward, combative, and radical with regard to both contents and method. Coulter quotes from forty-five books by Baudrillard and uses only two secondary works. Obviously Coulter knows where he wants to go. Coulter divides the book into three thematic sections, but it seems to me that the book’s structure works through a progressive highlighting of some of Baudrillard’s ideas.

Baudrillard’s principal idea – that of reversibility – is a model that can be detected as an underlying pattern intrinsic to post-modern culture. All systems based on techniques, science, and logic are bound to run empty sooner or later because technical perfectionism kills the enigmatic surplus or the quantity of the “unknown” that philosophical investigations should maintain if they want to be interesting and fruitful as *philosophies* and not merely as scientific accounts of realities. The list of instances explaining how systems can be undone by their own systematicity is long:

- theory is killed by the “terrorism of meaning” enforced by systematical and empirical studies;
- in universities, “perfect” and overwhelming administrations kill education;

- the closer we approach events through “real time coverage” the more we are losing contact with the world’s reality;
- because we are “overinformed” by the media we end up knowing nothing;
- the hysterical pursuit of security leads to insecurity;
- in cinema, perfectionist digitalization and virtualization kill any sense of illusion;
- in architecture, computer-generated or visualized design produces a generic, over-perfected quality that kills any sense of place;
- philosophy, once it has become so “perfect” that it is restricted to logic and positivism, will no longer be meaningful as a *philosophy*;

“Reversibility” is not an empirical fact; its existence cannot be supported by data. However, as a philosophical observation it remains conclusive. Coulter calls “poetical” what I would call philosophical but this is merely a choice of words: “what makes Baudrillard’s thought poetic is his highly attenuated sense for reversibility – the fact that all systems create the conditions of their own demise” (p. 1).

In any case, a poetic/philosophical view of the world is here opposed to a scientific one. The question is: is the one who points out such possible or actual developments propagating a meaningless universe and radical relativism or is he merely detecting those moments of reversibility because his philosophical analysis yields such result? The answer is easy. Of course, the nihilist does not invent the ‘nihil’ but he merely sees it and draws other peoples’ attention to it. Still, many opponents of Baudrillard do not seem to understand this. A few times Coulter refers to “fundamentalists” (who can be of the religious, the analytico-scientific, or the Marxist variety). Those fundamentalists want to kill the messenger because he points to an absurdity that is obvious, but which empirically minded scientists as well as ideologically blinded or fundamentally religious people do not want to or cannot admit. Coulter shows that for Baudrillard, the task of philosophical thought “is to go to the limit of hypotheses and processes, even if they are catastrophic” (p. 27) and that he tries to live with it. It is not his blindness that leads him to a realization of the emptiness of the postmodern world, but his fearless search for reality: “Baudrillard is frustrated by his times – by what we gave up in cancelling our metaphysical contact and making another more perilous one with things” (p. 42) but contrary to fundamentalist, he does “not fear the emptiness of the real” (p. 30). He “had watched the world drift into delirium and it opened him to a delirious point of view” (p. 11) and this vision is “far better than the world of knowing which today is the world of the fundamentalists” (p. 22). The following quotation appears several times in the book: “He acknowledged that living without truth is barely more tolerable than living with it – which would be a kind of fundamentalism as did Marxist thought for most of the twentieth century” (p. 27).

The radical consequence is that philosophy should not explain the world through technical systems but reinstate it in its most enigmatic form: “The world is given to us as enigmatic and unintelligible – the task of thought, in his view, is not to add meaning to it but to make it more enigmatic and more unintelligible” (p.151, *Impossible Exchange*); philosophy should “remain as long as possible in the enigmatic, ambivalent, and reversible side of thought” (p.68 *The Vital Illusion*). This does not mean that philosophy should blur reality and produce confusion. On the contrary, it should point out and establish those unsolvable and enigmatic features *in the clearest fashion*. Theory or philosophy should function not only like poetry, but also like photography, whose conceptualization Coulter explains very well in the book. The task of photography is “to highlight and deepen an unintelligibility and enigmaticalness already present in a world which hides behind appearances.” This is why photography is, as Coulter shows with the help of a quotation from Barthes, “subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks” (p.38 *Camera Lucida*).

We could extend the thoughts about fundamentalism and ask: what about God? As a matter of fact, for God is true what is true for any truth at the time of postmodernity: neither Nietzsche nor Baudrillard killed him, but God suffered, at the hands of techno-science, the fate of “reversibility.” Looking at our hyperreal techno-world, it is obvious that transcendence has not been abandoned but that it became secular, which follows the pattern of the systemic collapse enabled through the principle of reversibility: “The death of God is the root of the perfect crime” and by trying “to make the world better” it went “from bad to worse” (p. 42).

Coulter addresses another provocative subject, which is that of Baudrillard’s reception in America. Baudrillard himself was wondering whether “it [is] not the bias towards reality among Americans, their ‘affirmative thinking’, the naïve and ideological expression of the fact that they have, by their power, a monopoly of reality” that stands in the way of an adequate understanding of his thoughts (p.81, *Cool Memories*) Coulter reflects this against that part of American philosophy that he calls the “protective American tradition” which goes from Emerson to Camille Paglia, but by which also Chomsky is affected. Finally Coulter asks: “Does it speak to a certain cultural inability on the part of, or perhaps, suggest even a tradition of public American intellectuals, to out of hand reject Europe?” (p. 109)

Coulter concentrates on the “essential Baudrillard,” on his joyful attempts to find a way out of the expectations of empiricism, which led his to various approaches of challenging the notions of the real.

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein was born in Germany, did his undergraduate studies in Paris, and received a Ph.D. in philosophy from Oxford University in 1993. As a postdoctoral researcher based in Finland he undertook research for four years on Russian formalism in Russia and the Baltic countries. He received a ‘habilitation’ from the EHESS in Paris in 2000. He has also been researching for three years in Japan on the Kyoto School, and worked for the Center of Cognition of Hangzhou University (China) as well as at Tuskegee University in Alabama. He is now Associate Professor of philosophy at Gulf University for Science and Technology in Kuwait.