

LIBERAL BURNOUT

Arthur Kroker

Eric Fischl's painting, *Mannbattoes*, is perfectly symptomatic, both in its form (cinematic) and in its content (the recovery of primitive mythology), of liberal burnout as the political condition par excellence of the USA today.

If *Mannbattoes* adopts the cinematic strategy of representing (simulating) the foundational act of American history as a sliding film strip, that is because like the ultramodern culture which it describes, this artistic production is about American social reality as a fast dissolve into a post-modern screen. Not America any longer under the old sign-form of representational history, but American culture, particularly in the collective remembrance of its founding myths, as coded, internally and externally, by the semiological language of filmic images. America, then, as just that point where history disappears into a frenzied sign. In America: The Film, postmodern science and technology can now be taken for granted as the basis of America's cultural formation as the world's first cyberspace culture: that post-nouveau moment where fashion dissolves into the theatrics of seduction and auto-sadism; where suburban housing can be "sinister" (just as J.G. Ballard claims) because it is an ideologically inscribed stage-set for the playing out of passive and suicidal nihilism; where personality is reduced to instrumenalities without a referent; and where hysterical media holograms can provide temporary unifications for a political culture which, in its indifference and excess, matches perfectly the laconic, yet frenzied, world-strip theory of bio-genetics. America: The Film is a photographic negative run at hyper-speeds of the imposition of the USA into the inertia and psycho-energy of the ultramodern sign. This is why,

ARTHUR KROKER

perhaps, *Mannbattoes* can be so *formally* subversive: it actually visually recodes American culture, at least in its New York manifestation, as an indifferent sign-slide between genocide and seduction. Not so much Tom Wolfe's *Bonfires of the Vanities*, but a violent reprise of disembodied dreams and dark memory-seductions as the ruling psychosis. Like Fischl's earliest paintings (produced while he was teaching in Nova Scotia) which presented a series of glassine images of the mythic "Fischer family" (the members of which could be moved about freely to see what would happen to the old oedipal formula of Mommy-Daddy-Me), *Mannbattoes* is like the Fischer family writ large. Here, America is a shifting sign, with no beginning or ending, but always with the fascination of a violent, seductive and drifting semiurgical image.

But if *Mannbattoes* speaks of America as a fading screen-effect, it also undertakes another subversion: the evocative recovery of the language of primitive mythology. This painting viscerally captures the panic mood of sacrificial renunciation at the founding of technological society.

Jean Baudrillard ended his essay, "The Year 2000 Has Already Happened" with this gloomy prophecy:

It remains for us to accomodate ourselves to the time left to us, which is seemingly emptied of sense The end of this century is before us like an empty beach.

The fin-de-millennium as an empty beach? Or something else? *Mannbattoes* intimates that Baudrillard's "empty beach" has just been filled up with the celebrants of a carnival fit for the end of the world. Everyone's there: the woman in white with the sacrificial victim (the man's head); the masked dancing figures on stilts; magicians; and even humans as jackals in disguise. A seductive and violent scene of frenzy on the beach where what is played is the reverse side of the myth of freedom as symbolized by the Statue of Liberty (Our Lady of the Harbour). This is a triptych, not of new beginnings but of shutting-down time, less of the pioneering bourgeois spirit of sacrificial renunciation than of mythic excess, and not of the promise of dynamic progress as the animating vision of America but of the end of the century as a Bahktinian carnival for the New World descendents of the Calvinists. And maybe not even a simple antinomy between the kitschy statue of Liberty and the dream-like woman in white, but a more fateful mutation in the contemporary American mind. In this dismal season in which the very best of the European thinkers, Baudrillard included, break and run for the safety of melancholy romanticism, the New World mind, at least in its American outbreak, continues to operate in that unoccupied space between the advance of technological rationalization and the disappearance of religious sensibility. Here, the mythic spirit of sacrificial renunciation also mutates into a frenzied scene where the fin-de-millennium spreads out before us like random flashes of brilliant energy: a time of sacrifice *and* narcissism; a century of chaos *and* instrumentality without

LIBERAL BURNOUT

signification; an already post-millennial consciousness of primitive irrationalism *and* ultra-modern technique. What is liberty at the end of the world? It is also the perfect freedom of the last practitioners of the dying days of rationalism who, just as the philosopher George Grant predicted, would be finally free to choose the ends they will, in a universe fatefully indifferent to the choices they make. The disintegration of the once inspiring language of freedom, then, into random flashes of brilliant energy at the (decomposing) end of the twentieth-century.