

THE EVENING'S PORCELAIN

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Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*, California: Stanford University Press, 1989, 246 pp. \$35.00 cloth; \$11.95 paper.

So reibt die Spur
der Fledermaus durchs Porzellan des Abends.
Und wir: Zuschauer, immer, berall,
dem allen zugewandt und nie hinaus!
Uns berfilts. Wir ordnens. Es zerfällt.
Wir ordnens wieder und zerfallen selbst.
The way the track of a bat
goes rending through the evening's porcelain.
And we, spectators always, everywhere,
looking at, never out of, everything!
It fills us. We arrange it. It decays.
We re-arrange it, and decay ourselves.

Rilke, *Duino Elegies* #8

Douglas Kellner's *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* is an attractive *gestuel* attempt to follow the zigzag thought of Jean Baudrillard. Yet Kellner is not a "bat" in Baudrillard's "evening porcelain." This shortcoming, at first very frustrating, turns out to be the most positive aspect of Kellner's entire study because it allows us to notice the "faults" in this first full-scale critique of the works of Baudrillard.

Kellner's dedication of this work to T. W. Adorno rings truer than his subsequent inscription "in the spirit of T. W. Adorno." With only five

EVENING'S PORCELAIN

mentions of Adorno throughout the work, of which merely two are of value, there is little Adorno spirit to be found. I would recommend Kellner to give another glance at Adorno's essay on cultural criticism in *Prisms*,¹ and to recall the poignant pre-Baudrillardian gloom of "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."² Yet what strikes the reviewer as most problematic is Kellner's overall "distaste" for Baudrillard's expositions, and its subsequent "scene"—a distaste that I believe is a product of a missed proximity. Overall, Kellner's critique is not balanced in clear alternative positions, and, in the end, what he polemizes against is a product of what he has dedicated this very book to: the backlash of Critical Theory on Adorno,³ and by this he is "dragged into the abyss by its object."⁴

The table of contents of Kellner's *Baudrillard* is a clear, and at first luring glance at what could have been an extremely provocative study. However, the gloss on the major terms of Baudrillard and their incomplete division begin to develop as one delves into the text. Also, Kellner's overview omits texts such as *The Evil Demon of Images* and *Please Follow Me*, which, especially the former, are crucial to a serious study of Baudrillard's works, and barely receive a footnote within the entire study. These texts would have been instructive because they would allow the reader to see Baudrillardian 'theory' in a more direct and narrow encounter with its 'other.' In the end, one begins to notice that there is little "other" left to Baudrillard's own 'theory': the 'other' that begins its collapse into the ritual, the challenge of the code game of disjunctured signification; and it is this unexorcized point that haunts Kellner's entire study. It is evident that Kellner approached this work with resentment, and this has not allowed the author to insert himself within Baudrillard's positions and polemics. He has merely outlined problems, which are then pasted against and contrasted to other problematic theories. If Kellner believes that "radical philosophy—should contain a 'dreaming forward'"⁵ then such a 'dreaming forward' should be used within his critique of the matrix of the Baudrillardian problematic, and not as the Blochian 'Not-yet': of another "reality which lies in the haze." It still remains difficult, and it is doubtful if one may dislodge Baudrillard's 'theory' from its 'other,' or the 'other' from its 'theory'. Ironically, this is where Kellner's study begins to put us, by default, on the right path. Having encountered a serious attempt at the critique of the works of Baudrillard, we may now begin to debate to what stage this critique belongs: the pre-paraphysical, or the post-pataphysical. It remains crystal clear that those boundaries have not been crossed by Kellner's study. And once again, "Le cristal se venge."

Another sign of the times which Kellner does not notice is that a new wave of French Theory is already disappearing. Kellner instead views this new French Theory as appearing, (and polemicalizes and approaches his entire study from that assumption). He misses the mark by the simple twist of a prefix. This missed prefix also haunts and subverts Kellner's

struggles with Baudrillard. Kellner is horrified at Baudrillardian theory, and this horror stems from "the fear of [conceptual] death." Kellner notices this in David Cronenberg's films,⁶ but it seems that when translated into a base closer to home, i.e., social theory—history—philosophy, it becomes unbearably real for those still caught within the dark parenthesis of the subject. The "dark writers of the bourgeoisie" (Habermas), with their anxious erasures of the philosophy of the subject, already formed the displacement of the fractal processes of subjectivity. And as metastasis, philosophy and critique attends and accords with the art object. Both critic and artist need to realize that the art object's confession rests in the penetration of its own displacements. Caught up in an animated infringement, the point of view seeks to overtake the object for the recalcitrancy of the knot. Yet this knot is a form of exile theory and critique rarely allow.

In short, another answer to the theoretical tribulations (which Kellner tentatively exposes in some of Baudrillard's works) rests within Baudrillard's notion of death as a form. Yet without the required close reading of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Kellner's critique remains deceived by mere binary opposition. With the raw materials at hand, as in the two mentions of Baudelaire, Kellner turns away from the more poignant text of Baudelaire's "The Philosophy of Toys," where he could have expanded on the moment of disappointment in the discovery of the "souless" doll. This turning away is a form of melancholy also exposed within Baudrillard's *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, but it is overlooked by Kellner because of his inability to form a crucial notion of the "code." Thus Kellner does nothing more than amplify the fractures of sign and pleasure within the overarching conceptualization of Baudrillard's struggle with the notion of consumption. The use of an historical critique and the many allegiances with critical and utopian theories, which Kellner positions within this study, become little more than exercises of the weakening of power theories in usurpation. In sidestepping Baudrillard's fatal theory, Kellner submits to Adorno's fatal destiny of the culture critic.

If Kellner wished to "provide comprehensive critical views of the entirety of (Baudrillard's) published works to the present time,"⁷ then he also needed to include and mention a more comprehensive view of Baudrillard's communicative hopscotch that is played out in his many interviews. Of the thirteen interviews included in the bibliography, only seven are used in the text, four of which belong to the same source. The articles and interviews by Baudrillard are not a mere rehashing of Baudrillard's published works (as Kellner wishes us to believe), but important byways within the process of consumption which Baudrillard set out to illustrate as early as *The System of Objects* (1968). Baudrillard's interviews are an opportunity for us to see him practice his theories, because of the encounter they set in motion, which presuppose a *Grund* and its veer and origin, and effect, viz., the object form. Kellner could

EVENING'S PORCELAIN

have approached and played out this problematic as part of the undertow of a postmodern-praxis; a kind of Jamesonian reading without the social or the hermeneutic. Kellner could have also used his dedication to Adorno more wisely, and contrasted Baudrillard's object form to Adorno's micrology; or even more radically, used it as a whipping boy of the untenability of Lévinasian "desire." While armed with these options, all delightful in their (inter-esse) of the project of critique, Kellner shuns those spaces that comprise the edges of the other's position, and opts for a quick one-on-one check list of Baudrillardian binary concepts. A closer reading of Baudrillard could have unearthed a more intact version of his terminological formulation, yet from the manner in which Kellner exposes Baudrillard's notions and arguments, we are pillaged of the crucial yet atopic notion of the code within consumption, and consumption as code. In that oversight Kellner is confirming the very Baudrillardian concept of the disappearance of history, because he allows his critique to become *carceplexes* to the hyperspace of fatal theory. Baudrillard's functional catastrophe wins out over Kellner's use of a hopeful revolutionary form.

For instance, together with Baudrillard's article "Sign-Function and Class Logic,"⁸ where we may find the short yet compelling account of the mechanics of agency (which Kellner faults Baudrillard for failing to develop),⁹ we need only to leaf through *The System of Objects*, *The Consumer Society*, and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, to find the uneliminable extracted portions of the "appareillage" and "découpage," of that which carves out the spaces of absence of the mechanics of agency. Yet nowhere in Kellner's study do we find mention of Baudrillard's noticing such a notion. The spaces of absence in the mechanics of agency are exemplified by the concepts of "lack,"¹⁰ "digest,"¹¹ and "environment."¹² A provisional definition of the mechanics of agency could be understood as the consumed relations articulated on objects, and proliferated by objects as an active functionality. Yet, since Baudrillard's turning of a concept allows for the very atopy of its axis, it is important that we opt for a complex systems reading, and quiet the raging "magical thinking of ideology." Thus, and simply put, where Baudrillard is straining to see the subject without the environs of an historical, political, social, and cultural space,¹³ Kellner strives to 'dream forward', by "enwrapping images" of a normative past, an obvious slippage into a Blochian political myopia by adopting knowledge in the service of hope.¹⁴

The language needed in radical social theory, radical politics, and political theory and which Kellner advocates is only convivial within its own objectifications, and furthermore, it is itself a persistent situation whether or not it passes beyond discourse and reality. Such a durability more than unlikely leaves us at an impasse, and yet it is where needs and use value seek to resurrect the "many worlds at once" that Kellner needs to justify the edifying of critical social theory. The service of hope, which

underlines Kellner's quick invalidation of Baudrillard's political atopy, turns on its normative bed only to find that it has slept through the mephitic of a grounding heuristic. The service of hope, to which Kellner submits, is also a telling example of an accumulation of theoretical weariness. This is also akin to a recent position of Jean-Francois Lyotard,¹⁵ coupled with an historical resentment but without the benefit of a Margolian reading. In short, Douglas Kellner's study of Jean Baudrillard partakes in the short-circuit of metatheories. The upshot of such a study will yet be positive if the discourse is opened to a wider public, a public which would learn from the shortcoming of Kellner's rigid "unsecluded" sweep through what exists as the challenge of seduction¹⁶ and the "Geschick" of consumption. In Kellner's refusal to even minimally "refract (himself) in another logic,"¹⁷ he excuses himself from playing the game of spotting the "vanishing point(s)." He remains thus snared within the irony of a vantage point: the weakening catholic substratum of sociological and psychological pronouncements.¹⁸ To eliminate Baudrillard's "subject-object dichotomy,"¹⁹ by questioning it with a fiercer dichotomous categorization²⁰ and chic theoretical juxtapositions²¹ is not critical nor historical. More can be obtained from a closer cognitive mapping of Baudrillard's texts, than from a sarcastic resentment of Baudrillard as phenomenon. Kellner's study illustrates that it has become pointless to snare the materiality of content by form, and that asking for a "centrality of dialectics and mediation"²², would merely be a ricochet of a metaphysics of history played out within the fatigued need of revolutionary structure. Heuristic is the stench of a shelved utopia.

Kellner invalidates Baudrillard's project without defining it, and asks that we go beyond it within a redemptive consensus. Within these parameters, Kellner's *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* does not get beyond its other, but remains trapped between the *gebärde* and *gestuel* of its own con. Within the works of Baudrillard, and from a more careful reading of the atopy of his conceptualizations we can notice that he "produces" a disjunction of surfaces within the crystals of philosophical discourse. I would suggest that we take that lead and begin to read Baudrillard's texts as a fallout of a hermeneutics of disjuncture.²³

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Notes

1. T.W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981).
2. *Ibid.*, 34.
3. See P. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans., by Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xxxiv. See also Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, (Annandale, Australia: Power Institute Publications, 1987) pp. 51-52.

EVENING'S PORCELAIN

4. Adorno, *Prisms*, 34.
5. D. Kellner, "David Cronenberg: Panic Horror and the Postmodern Body," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 13(3) (1989), 100.
6. *Ibid.*, 89-101. See also "The Ghost Dance," and interview with Jacques Derrida, by Andrew Payne and Mark Lewis, in *Public*, 1989, 61-66.
7. Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*, (California: Stanford Univ. Press, 1989).
8. J. Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos, 1981), pp. 29-62.
9. D. Kellner, *Baudrillard: From Marxism*, 18-19.
10. J. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. and intro. by Mark Poster (California: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 22-25.
11. *Ibid.*, 29, 35.
12. Baudrillard, *For a Critique*, 185-203. See also "An Interview with Jean Baudrillard," Judith Williamson, trans. by Brand Thumin, *Block* 15 (Spring 1989), 17-18.
13. See Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, (New York: Semiotext(c) 1987), 81, 84, 120, 124-125; "The Year 2000 Will Not Take Place," in *Futur * Fall: Excursions into Postmodernity*, (Sidney, Australia: Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1986), 19, 21-22; and *Selected Writings*, p. 25, 45, 84. See "Banality in Cultural Studies," Megham Morris, *Block*, 14 (1988), 15-26.
14. Baudrillard, J. *The Evil Demon of Images*, Annandale, Australia: Power Institute Publications, 1987), p. 30; see also Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, pp. 125-126, 315-326, 385; also Baudrillard, *For a Critique*: "...abolish the cardinal reference to the individual, ..abandon the constitutive social structure of the individual ... for man never really does come face to face with his own needs. (This) applies equally well to "survival" needs. In this instance, man is not reproduced as man: he is simply regenerated as a survivor (a surviving productive force)" p. 86. See also Sloterdijk, *Critique*, pp. 180, 211 fn. 30; "...every living person is a survivor," (*überlebener*, literally, over-liver; -trans.).
15. "II Post-Futuro", colloquia con Jean-Francois Lyotard, Lydia Breda, *L'Espresso*, n. 2 xxxvi, 14 Gennaio, 1990, 103-105.
16. J. Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, (New York: Semiotext(c), 1988), pp. 69-70.
17. *Ibid.*, 70.
18. See Arthur Kroker, "Panic Psychoanalysis," in *Panic Encyclopedia*, Arthur Kroker, Marilouise Kroker, and David Cook, (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 188-189.
19. Kellner, 179.
20. *Ibid.*, 1, 123.
21. Kellner uses the work of theorists such as Adorno, Bloch, Habermas and Marcuse against Baudrillard. In most cases, Kellner overlooks the problems inherent in these theoreticians for the thrill of entering into the game against Baudrillard. For instance, Kellner criticizes Baudrillard's claim that art has lost its critical negative function, while seeming

to forget Adorno's "timeless present" of the masses to which the communication of critical negativity is blocked. This problem was also expanded in the Adorno/Jauss debate over the subject and the public, which veils the problem of ontology in Adorno's dialectics. And, while forgetting Baudrillard's position on utopia (see *The Ecstasy of Communication*, pp. 88-89) and in using Bloch's notion of nonsynchronicity, Kellner instantly adopts the political myopia of the attached notions of "objective *Wirklichkeit*" versus the "*Noch-Nicht-Sein*" in the postponement of truth to a future date. In using Habermas (the strongest of his potential allies), Kellner overlooks Habermas's "colonization of the inner world," a rapprochement of the Habermasian "criteria of critique which no longer needs to be grounded in a philosophy of history" ("*Dialektik der Rationalisierung*" in *Die neue Unbersichtlichkeit*, Frankfurt, 1985, p. 167), with the Baudrillardian critique of the "religion of meaning" and "logic of representation." In using Marcuse, Kellner again turns away from the contradictions of critical theory which oppose individual and society, and allows the subsequent turning of the notion of society to that of a work of art. To sum up, neither the Great Refusal of Marcuse, nor the theoretical entanglements in Habermas, the postponement of truth in Bloch, nor that intact sensibility found within a "melancholy science" in Adorno, amount to an easy counterposition against the theories of Baudrillard, or towards the Baudrillard "scene."

22. Kellner, 216.

23. For further discussion of this notion, see my: *The Hermeneutics of Disjuncture: Baudrillard, Perniola, Rella, Cacciari and the Embrasure of Philosophy*. (forthcoming)