Book Review/Compte rendu

Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication.* New Edition. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012, 128 pp. $14.95 paper (9781584350576)

It is somewhat unsettling to find oneself writing a retrospective piece on the 25th anniversary reissue of *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Jean Baudrillard would smell a rat right away. After all, this text was already retrospective in itself, serving as his habilitation thesis meant to review the assumed coherence and trajectory of his published work (and promote him to the lofty status of research director in the French academy). As he explains at the beginning of the book, this is an impossible contradiction because it retroactively imposes unity on the texts. He proposes instead to approach his own work as a traveller who stumbles upon the texts and must try to make sense of them.

For a generation of graduate students (of which I was a part), stumbling, discovering, and trying to make sense are familiar experiences of encountering Baudrillard, as his translated work first began to make its way into the Canadian classroom. But this encounter was also exhilarating — it meant submitting our most basic sociological assumptions to the assault of his logic. Baudrillard forever disrupted our simple notions of representation built on the false/true image or word, along with sociological totems like stereotype, false consciousness, and manipulation (and their social correlatives — the silently oppressed, mass man, and cultural dupe). In their place came a serious consideration of the world saturated with the play, pleasures, and terrors of images and words — so saturated that the notion of the "real" became threatened by its own overrepresentation. If we ever believed that the real could exist outside of its representation, this fantasy became more and more untenable as media and technology developed through the 20th century.

Baudrillard is perhaps a little disingenuous when he claims no coherence to his work preceding *Ecstasy*. Baudrillard's earliest work grappled with the problem of Marx's exchange/use value distinction, with use value revealed as a construction of human need unmediated by signification and systems of the circulation of meaning. By adding the semiotic levels of symbol and sign to the mix, Baudrillard allowed readers to begin to see the world of contemporary capitalism. The symbol was an object still linked into a system of sacred meaning and irreplaceability

(he gives the wedding ring as an example), and a sign was an object that got its meaning only in the unending movement of signification itself and is essentially replaceable (he gives rings as fashionable jewellery as an example). The symbolic realm functions outside of utility and production. Instead it is a wasteful, irrational, and excessive world — that of gift, potlatch, sacrifice. It is for this reason also profoundly social.

A quarter of a century after the first publication of *Ecstasy*, it is time to acknowledge that Baudrillard is not a strange, exotic foreigner — a "French theorist," a "postmodern," or as the book cover insists, a "provocateur." It is no mere coincidence that so much Baudrillard scholarship happens in Canada, as thinkers like McLuhan and Innis are his intellectual ancestors. In *Ecstasy* we find Baudrillard's McLuhanesque description of the car as total system that monitors itself and the driver, speaks to the driver, informs, advises, controls — and into which we are wired. (Like McLuhan, Baudrillard is often wrongly considered an advocate for the brave new world he so accurately analyzes.) Innis too haunts these pages, with the monumental, durable form of political domination and representation being replaced by the fleeting, incessant, and "light" world of the hyper-real. Monuments and buildings, Baudrillard explains are no longer testaments to memory and time, but are now machines for advertising, fashion, and the sign system.

The dominant trope animating all of Baudrillard's work is that of keeping up with the social phenomena around him. This is his signal strength — understanding that contemporary life is characterized by its rapidity of change (especially of representation). As he puts it — "It is not enough for theory to describe and analyse, it must itself be an event in the universe it describes" (p. 80), running just ahead of the curve of change. Baudrillard's sociological subject is the ordinary person in everyday life trying to locate meaning within the context of such change. In this sense, *Ecstasy* is most clearly paralleled by C. Wright Mills and Dorothy Smith. Like them, he uses images of scale to explain the everyday experience of abstraction of the real, the feeling of floating outside of a reality that can be vaguely sensed, but not grasped or articulated. The subject of *Ecstasy* is literally ex-static: unstable, giddy, and overstimulated. At the heart of his argument is the loss of meaning in everyday life as everything becomes knowable (obscene — too close, against a scene or staging), but only in the guise of "information" without depth. The soul, he quips, will be located one day by neuroscientists as residing somewhere in the brain.

As a sociologist, Baudrillard has both enriched this field and questioned its very epistemological grounds. He reminds us that social categories exist in and through statistics, policy language, and media im-

ages. For example, all the "single mothers" in Canada do not exist as an organic community or identity, and if they are politically organized as a group it is because they have been understood and administered around their categorically imposed identity as being of a certain (at risk) type of person. But, of course, the real that sociology clings to has real political implications. Baudrillard would see the Harper government's recent cancellation of the mandatory long-form census in Canada as symptomatic of a postmodern society in which traditional social identities like class, ethnicity, and community have broken down or "imploded." We see in *Ecstasy* a eulogy for the real, but also a desperate attempt to hold onto it. The census was one of our most powerful rhetorical tools for the "real" existence of groups. We saw too how various types of communities and constituencies have become used to gaining rights and resources by way of being thus officially counted. It was a stroke of political genius to officially make social groups unofficial. In a world of counting and measurement, those not counted do not count. But Baudrillard would point out that this dependence on counting could be a dangerous information game, with critical mass the measure of value. He would argue that the value of Acadian culture, for example, cannot be found in its measurement, but in the narratives and mythologies of their expulsion and the stubborn will of a group not to be expunged.

Baudrillard reminds us that sociology is not a technical field — it is an ethnographic and rhetorical field in which we walk, for example, with Dorothy Smith (and her poorly behaved dog) through a neighbourhood in Toronto. As she takes her reader on this imaginary tour, we in fact walk through late capitalism as Smith tries to get the dog not to shit on the rich people's lawns. In this hilarious little story from her early work, we come to "see" late capitalist property relations clearly in the absurd task of trying to get the (bad) dog to see them. Baudrillard would love this image of excess and control — excrement and property. He would remind us that the social that needs defending is found in the seduction of narrative, poetry, and myth, and not in the "ecstasy of communication" or knowledge as information. Nevertheless, as rhetoricians of the social we are forced to play with the authority and power of measurement, statistic, and information. As Prime Minister Stephen Harper recently incited us to "commit sociology," Baudrillard helps us think about this commitment as a political and epistemological action because these two realms can no longer be separated.

This text remains a classic that should be included in upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses in media, representation, and culture. In my experience, students find Baudrillard's texts challenging, but also pithy and stimulating. Baudrillard never "informs" or talks down to his

reader — he speaks with enthusiasm and wonder. *Ecstacy* is a good entry into Baudrillard as it covers many of his most essential ideas with lots of thought-provoking examples that encourage students to ruminate and enjoy the sheer stimulation that is Baudrillard.

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