

Politics Of Seduction

The high priest of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard, has become the trendiest philosopher in town. Suzanne Moore and Stephen Johnstone spoke to him about his work

Your latest book is on America and you have commented that: 'All of the themes explored in my previous books suddenly appeared stretching before me in concrete form.' Questions about the loss of reality, the primacy of the image and the passivity of 'the masses' all recur and you say that there is no hope in American society. But what gives you hope?

I've said in the past that hope is a rather unimportant value. We are in a period when hope is not a very lucid idea. I realise that Utopias are very active in the US - the green movement, the feminist movement and so on. These are the so-called hope-bringing movements that aspire to be revolutionary but in actual fact in the American hyperreality they are part of the same publicity game. They may not be part of the official power but nevertheless they play a role in the mega-publicity operation that is America.

They are not innocent of this or uncontaminated by it and in this way they have an enormous superficiality about them. They keep changing. Movements disappear or emerge not because the ideas are good or bad but simply as a sign of vitality - the physical vitality of American reality which is in constant flux. I can't see that this sort of thing can really be described in terms of politics.

I don't believe in the ecological movement but I do it. One doesn't have to believe in it to do it and I would like to say that I do it! In America it's the doing that is important and it doesn't matter whether the ideas are good or bad. As an example of energy, transformation and transmutation America is still extremely alive. Much more than Europe.

In America you describe Amer-

ican culture as 'vulgar but easy', as a culture which its own intellectuals are unable to analyse. Doesn't this imply a nostalgia for European culture, particularly academic culture?

Yes. The European position is very ambiguous. The European model sees American culture as a superficiality and it analyses it in a superficial way. But American culture or rather non-culture is in itself completely original. It's not just a lack of culture and doesn't need to be interpreted negatively. The word superficial should really be in inverted commas because I've taken the banal, the normal way of looking at America and turned it around. This non-culture is in itself positive and shouldn't be viewed through the eyes of European nostalgia.

If American intellectuals can't understand their own culture do you agree with Umberto Eco who says that American professors should be pensioned off? Is it possible that high school kids have an intuitive understanding of their own society that the intellectual can never have?

Yes. There is a possibility of understanding by intuition. But the American intellectual cannot understand his own culture because he is locked into an intellectual ghetto, his defensive style is to mimic European culture which is why there is such a great divide between the American intellectual and American culture. Of course young people have a much livelier intuition and are not put in this false position.

When I wanted to investigate American hyperreality for myself, my colleagues refused to participate so I wouldn't say along with Eco that they should be pensioned off. I would actually send them into the desert.

Ah yes, the desert! You say that: 'Deserts are sublime forms distanced from all society, all sentimentality, all sexuality.' And you also suggest: 'One should always bring something to sacrifice in the desert and offer it as a victim. A woman. If something has to disappear there, something equal in beauty to the desert, why not a woman?' What is the point of such a gratuitously provocative statement? Is the corollary to sacrifice a post-modern philosopher in the centre of the city?

It would be a very good idea to publicly sacrifice a post-modern philosopher.

Naturally there is a certain amount of provocation in the image of sacrificing a woman, but I don't necessarily regard the term sacrifice negatively. I see it as a positive thing. There is a certain amount of reciprocal sacrifice in seduction for instance. Something has to die but I don't see it as having to remove someone - perhaps desire or love must die. Sacrificing a woman in the desert is a logical operation because in the desert one loses one's identity. It's a sublime act and part of the drama of the desert. Making a woman the object of the sacrifice is perhaps the greatest compliment I could pay her.

In New York recently there was a show called *Resistance (Anti-Baudrillard)* to which a number of prominent artists contributed. How did you feel being confronted with your own work as something to be struggled against, as something to be contested as melancholic, full of inertia, as offering no way forward?

As I said before, there is always an element of provocation in what I write. It is a sort of challenge to the intellectual and the reader that starts a kind of game. Naturally if you provoke then you must expect some counter-provocation and some negative reaction. The fact that it is so virulent is really quite interesting. It shows that in a way my negativity has passed on to them, subliminally perhaps, which is what I expected. I would say that there has

been a *hyper-reaction* to my work and from that point of view I have succeeded.

So what about the position of women in your work. Are they experts in seduction?

I am not in agreement with hardline feminist ideology which says that woman as seducer is a degrading role. In my view the strategy of seduction is a happy, liberating power for women. It feeds into the simulation. Unfortunately in feminism everything that happens to be female is defended - *l'écriture féminine*, poetry, any kind of artistic creation and this makes it a kind of mirror of masculine simulation. This is a negative simulation, an unfortunate simulation. It seems to me that the feminine strategy of seduction is not an alienation of woman as the feminists believe. One must rise above the battle of the sexes and get away from sexist alienation. Men and women shouldn't oppose each other. I believe one can regain feminine seductiveness as a positive virtue and that this is one way to rise above it. But of course I risk being misunderstood.

Isn't that just a romantic view of woman as transcendent? A lot of feminists have already criticised the essentialism that you criticise.

It's important to make a critique of woman as woman. Seduction is not just a sexual strategy and it's not one-sided. More a complicity. There are rules to the game. It's a very physical game and one of equality. Both sides are deeply involved and the stakes are high. It's almost an ideology played out to the detriment of democracy. Right now men are striving themselves to find an ideology which defines them and I think that femininity should go beyond its narrow confines, beyond the way that it sees itself at the moment.

Is there such a thing, then, as love?

There is an acting-out, but I don't really know. I don't have a great deal to say about love.

Do you have children? Do they make you feel optimistic?



Jean Baudrillard: 'It would be a very good idea to publicly sacrifice a post-modern philosopher'

I had two. Today they are grown-up. Perhaps I was a bad father because I didn't project my own personal hopes on to them so they were carried along by their own impetus. They do their own thing.

Do you gamble?

Yes I do in Las Vegas. Sometimes I am not a gambler.

Is your work a gamble? If so what are the stakes?

I don't know whether you could call them cultural stakes. You must not confuse the stakes with the results. The problem is to not destroy the work - perhaps the work doesn't have a stake - it spins around itself until it's exhausted. The stake I think would be its potential for energy. It's almost like a game of poker. The stake is, in a way, a game beyond the bidding in order to see other people's hands. And the stake is for other people to show their hand.

In *The Ecstasy Of Socialism* you denounce 'the unbelievable naivety of ... socialist thinking'. Does this position simply reflect a total disenchantment with post-'68 politics? Haven't you just exchanged any engagement with the political for a fascination with the mindlessness of consumer culture? There is a certain problem because the generation of '68 brought everything into play. There was a spectacular negation of culture, a sacrifice of political values. Of course after a sacrifice there is always a vacuum, a cultural vacuum. In America this vacuum has been replaced not by a culture but by events which have a reciprocity with the '68 political scene - a cultural fireworks.

The radicalism of '68 has passed into major events like the stock exchange crash, the advent of Aids - that is American radicalism. That is a radicalism in which the intellectual has no place, the intellectual in the traditional sense. Intellectual radicalism has passed into events so the intellectual has been neutralised.

The intellectual has no future. •