"What happens happens, and that's all there is to it"

Book review: *The intelligence of evil or the lucidity pact* (Jean Baudrillard) and *The neutral* (Roland Barthes)

The intelligence of evil or the lucidity pact
Jean Baudrillard (translated by Chris Turner)
Berg Publishers, 2005
ISBN 1-845203-34-8

The neutral: lecture course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)
Roland Barthes (translated by Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier)
Columbia University Press, 2005
ISBN 0-231134-04-5

Reviewed by Steve Finbow

A book review always contains the simultaneous representation of the book it reviews. And it does not.

Sentences similar to these litter the text of Jean Baudrillard's *The intelligence of evil or the lucidity pact*; they can sometimes irritate ("Before the event it is too early for the possible. After the event it is too late for the possible") and sometimes illuminate ("The non-event is not when nothing happens"). Samuel Beckett, a fellow exponent of the elliptical and the bald-faced, would have loved that. Baudrillard has never been as willfully abstruse as Gilles Deleuze or Felix Guattari; he has never been as playful as Jacques Derrida; he has never been as rib-ticklingly laugh-out-loud as Michel Foucault, or as technologically perceptive as Paul Virilio. In *Intelligence*, he has decided to attempt a synthesis of his theories while challenging, incorporating, and having fun with those of his contemporaries.

Baudrillard's thesis addresses the problems of dualistic-relationship reasoning – what we mean when we say "duality". According to him, there is an inevitability and inviolability to such relationships, as in, among others, active/passive, subject/object and signifier/signified. According to this form, you are either one thing or you are another; there is no room for ambiguity or fluidity. Evil cannot exist without good. The capitalist powers cannot exist without the counter-claim of

terrorism; terrorism being a symptom of the West's unconscious desire for an evil adversary, an almost Manichaeistic dualism.

Baudrillard, like many post-structuralist theorists, chooses to place the study of human thought in the context of a struggle within and against the Western concept of either/or. He attacks and condemns the prevalence of such Aristotelian thought systems. For example, Baudrillard questions the morality of cloning, arguing that it is a sign that the human species is approaching the end of its usefulness. Baudrillard argues, in a manner similar to Michel Houellebecq in his recent novel *The possibility of an island*, that cloning represents the end of sexual reproduction, a move from the Other to the Same, of the obliteration of biological diversity in favour of homogeneity.

As with his earlier analyses – particularly those made during the first Gulf War, where he said that the US-led United Nations coalition response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was more a media event than an actual war – Baudrillard offers no end of controversy-laden prognoses. If history, as Francis Fukuyama would have us believe, ended in 1992, with the end of Soviet dominance in Europe, then the events of 9/11 propelled us beyond history. Any event – be it war, natural disaster, *Big Brother* – metastasises throughout the media, which translates it into instant history ("Information represents the most effective machinery for de-realizing history") – or, to put it another way, nothing ("We live in terror of the excess of meaning and of total meaninglessness").

History, according to Baudrillard, is not real. It is meaningless. Why? Because it is lived instantly. Living in the instant moment does not afford us the luxury of looking back and analysing it from an Olympian perspective, uncorrupted by personal, professional or governmental bias. The speed with which such events are reported upon simply does not permit it. The media penetrates our lives, invites us to respond to such events in a visceral fashion – regardless of whether or not the raw facts correspond with their interpretation – and history as it has been traditionally understood – as the agreed-upon facts of human existence from the beginning up to now – is brought to an end.

What we are left with, argues Baudrillard, is a world founded upon actual experience having been replaced by one of simulated stimuli, superficial rituals, games and cartoonish structures – a copy world, or, as he terms it, "hyperreality". The vortex of hyperreality, Baudrillard argues, is America. Las Vegas is more "real" than the real – think The Luxor and New York New York hotels: buildings that represent a world seen only as American, seen only from America. Rather than the self-proclaimed fulcrum of the planet, America is regarded by the rest of the world as self-absorbed and self-important.

His theory of seduction may help provide an answer to the overwhelming instances of such simulation in that it offers an escape route. For

Baudrillard seduction is beyond exchange and power, freed from the shackle of the sign, seduction is beyond simulation; a foretaste of a post-capitalistic, pre-utopian world, it implies an ambivalence of order. Baudrillard theorises that the West has lost its seductive desire, and that the USA dreamt 9/11 – which is not to say that it did not occur, but rather that it was a part of our historical unconscious desire for a radical dualism.

These theories are vitally important to our understanding of aesthetics, politics and war in that they provide a distanced but analytical observation of the media's preoccupation with the immediacy of life and information. If you have never read Baudrillard, *The intelligence of evil or the lucidity pact* is a good introduction; I had a slight problem with Chris Turner's translation: quite a few sentences ended in prepositions – something that would never occur in the French language – but overall he has rendered the original, if not breezy, at least readable.

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Like Baudrillard, the late Roland Barthes viewed the proliferation of news media in Western society, with its overloaded and misunderstood signs, as a symptom of late-stage capitalism. Like Baudrillard, Barthes was interested in seduction and in consciousness and value. And like Baudrillard, Barthes's philosophy attracts and does battle with duality. Barthes's writing, grounded in language theory, almost consumes itself as it is written; *The neutral* is full of side notes, references, tables, graphs and quotes. In this, he is unlike Baudrillard, who writes the present as is; Barthes writes the past as if it will be, as if it were still being created, using anecdote and reference to advance his theory.

The neutral is a collection of lectures Barthes conducted at the Collège de France in 1978, two years before he died. Barthes writes, "Only the Dead are creative objects," and the text is almost a ghost of itself, inhabiting previous texts and texts by dead authors. Barthes discusses writers as diverse as Spinoza, Paul Valéry, and Thomas De Quincey, absorbing their works and history into an intertextual present moment that is itself a form of "The Neutral": the area between, above, and beyond the antagonism of the either/or and so outside the constrictions of Western thought. Barthes also riffs on subjects from Buddhism to Pyrrhonic Skepticism by way of the study of signs, objects, and their correspondent belief systems. Scenes and memories from his childhood intersperse his theories and act as philosophical vignettes, themselves the essence of the neutral.

These lectures masquerade as a discourse; camouflaged as text, the book is one of paradox – a book of and against paradigmatic thought. The theory of *le neutre* first appeared in Barthes's earliest work *Writing degree zero*, and *The neutral* summarises his questioning of the Western philosophical canon and attempts to unthread its binary structure. Barthes theorises that neutral points are beyond and without opposition: they baffle, they

emerge from and/or escape the dualistic world. These points are what Barthes calls "twinklings" and they include sleep, silence, anger and indifference.

Barthes's writing style is cool and limpid, and the translators have rendered the lectures in a similar manner. This is a beautiful book, not only in appearance but also in the author's relaxed, almost wistful intelligence.

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Why is it that Britain and America distrust French philosophers? *Intelligence* and *The neutral*, rather than symptoms of the decline of post-structuralism as a historico-cultural movement, further our understanding of a world at war with itself and its neighbours, a world bereft of ideas, fraught with misunderstanding – stem-cell research, artificial intelligence, Islam. Barthes and Baudrillard question the basis of Western thought: Barthes, by challenging the dyadic hegemony of male/female, subject/object, positive/negative, rethinks Western philosophy; Baudrillard, refreshingly, demystifies our obsession with good and evil. In a desecularised yet increasingly fundamentalist world, he tells it like it is. "The possible itself is no longer possible. What happens happens, and that's all there is to it."