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Reversible Feminism

By Mike Gane

Victoria Grace, *Baudrillard's Challenge: A Feminist Reading*. London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2000.

The writings of Jean Baudrillard have often elicited a strong not to say sometimes violent response from feminists. Baudrillard indeed has made a point of defining his position as hostile to the main strands of the second wave women's movement, and to the human rights movement more generally. More, he has sometimes gone out of his way to provoke a reaction from feminists, most notably his comment that in exchange for the beauty of the desert it would be good to sacrifice a woman (referred to and discussed by Grace, p. 165). Baudrillard's book, *Seduction*, contained a condemnation of a feminism which allied itself with the real unveiling of feminine sexuality, an unveiling which ended up, for this analyst, as an alliance with pornography and promotion. If he has identified and praised that form of the feminine which found its force in seduction, Baudrillard concludes that women were never weak subjects of men, for this was an ideology, he suggested, which emerged out of the feminist movement itself. A strand of feminist thought has grown up which has a philosophy not that far removed from this idea (most obviously represented by Camile Paglia's works), but what precisely is the feminist response to Baudrillard? Victoria Grace, who is based in New Zealand, has accepted Baudrillard's challenge, and her work "is not a book about Baudrillard; it is an engagement with his work" (3). Just as there was an Althusserian feminism, and a Foucauldian feminism, does Grace provide us with a Baudrillardian feminism?

Chapter one looks at Baudrillard's early work, particularly the logic of economic value. This early work on semiological logics and the 'hegemony of the code' is presented as a key theory of modern society and culture, and the failure to grasp it and "to reject it on political grounds from a feminist perspective is," she says, "a 'political11 mistake" (35). It is not simply that the oppositions male/female, men/women, are patriarchal, but also more deeply that the real enemy is the code which permits these oppositions to appear in the "object form" (35). The emphasis in this first main statement of Baudrillard's ideas is thus very clearly focused on the sign/symbol and the logic of the semiological reduction of symbolic exchange. This strategy has the very unfortunate effect of ignoring the earlier

analysis of consumer society which constituted Baudrillard's first concern and which entailed locating gender differences within affluent capitalist patterns of advertising and objectification.

The next chapter looks at Irigaray, Braidotti, and Butler on identity, subjectivity, power, and desire, in the light of Baudrillard's conception of the symbolic order and seduction, ideas developed in the 1970s as he deepened his theory of the anthropological alternative to modernity. Grace identifies and draws out Baudrillard's conception of how genders are situated within forms of symbolic exchange and reversibility in primitive cultures. When modern societies emerge the genders fall into place and become elements of the code of semiotic culture dominated by the phallic mark, the measure of sexual exchange (39). Here Grace makes her way carefully through the minefield of feminist critiques of Baudrillard, throwing Baudrillard's principles back at theorists like Irigaray (45-54), Braidotti (54-60), Butler (60-64). The final section of the chapter looks at Baudrillard's critiques of Foucault and Deleuze on power, returning to gender to show how, for Baudrillard, gender constructions of difference become a "simulation model" (70). This discussion is developed without an attempt to define what is meant by the feminist movement or feminism, and Grace does not sketch out the main concerns of feminism since the 1960s and its internal debates and divisions. As with the avoidance of the analysis of consumerism, this avoidance of feminist history gives the discussion an abstract character. Baudrillard's own analyses coherently connect consumerism and a concern to show how modern feminism fell into the traps set for "the feminine" and for the "female body" by consumer culture dominated by new media. Grace remains, however, somewhat at a distance, never providing concrete examples of how a Baudrillardian feminism might respond.

Chapter three looks at "difference" in the hyperreal world, the relation of "gender" to simulation, hyperreality, the silent masses, and the end of the social - well-known theses developed by Baudrillard in the 1970s. This is developed at first by reference to the theme of gender "difference" and "positive identity" as the false and impossible projects of contemporary semiotic culture. After a short section on feminism, most of the chapter takes on cultural and political critiques of Baudrillard that have little to do with feminism (83-116), the argument being that there is, in general, little understanding of Baudrillard's theory even after "more than thirty years" (116). The tendency of the earlier chapters is repeated here in a discussion that moves towards an interest in theoretical clarification rather than the direct issues of feminist struggle.

Chapter four, entitled "Hyperreal Genders," looks at simulation of gender. The attack on Judith Butler is based on the theoretical position developed by Baudrillard in his writings in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly on his theory of the transpolitical. Butler's

conception of gender performativity is exactly that specified by Baudrillard as that which traps the feminine in the contemporary code - "[t]hat which Butler advocates as democratic, Baudrillard observes happening with the operational, functional logic of the hyperreal" (125). Outlining the theory of the transpolitical Grace moves to consider the transsexual against the emerging literature of transgending in feminist and queer literature. She notes how Baudrillard's ideas have here and there been picked up and used by feminists but shorn of their critical power, misread as positively supporting "trans" this and "trans" that (139). Here Grace is forthright in her condemnation: "Those advocating transgenderism as a radical transgression of oppressive social processes of normative gendering do not ask how it is that, contemporarily, their discourses of fluidity and multiplicity intersect with the generalised proliferation of 'trans' traversing all spheres, and how their 'politics' might be complicit with hegemonic trends" (140). But we do not find out if Grace is alone among feminists or if her position is aligned and part of a struggle within feminism, for although she debates with opponents, it is difficult to find where she has friends.

Chapter five, called "The Inevitable Seduction," looks at seduction, woman as object, exchange and sacrifice. The main theme of the chapter is to explain and apply Baudrillard's threefold division of cultures into those of the rule, the law, and the norm. Grace draws on a range of anthropological research to examine and affirm Baudrillard's notion of primal seduction, symbolic exchange and the rule (142-147), before examining the theoretical opposition between rule and law (147-150). The next sections present the problems of gender and sex in the light of this distinction in which the fundamental order of symbolic exchange does not fix femininity in the female, but permits reversibility of masculine and feminine, seduction and production (151). Then she examines the transition to a combinatorial culture in which instead of reversibility, there emerges a situation in which sexes "become interchangeable" (155) and more and more transparent, "sex is so close it merges with its representation" (156). After this presentation of Baudrillard's ideas, Grace looks at, and counters, three feminist critiques - those of Sadie Plant, Irigaray, and Louise Burchill. Then Grace tackles the notion of sacrifice and Baudrillard's comment on sacrificing a woman in the desert (165). Grace condemns the comment, since it shows "little respect for the tragedy" of the widespread violence against women in modern societies (165). But then Grace does try to explain, in the light of Baudrillard's theory, how such a sacrifice could be seen in terms of an accursed share, a sacrificial victim which is "valued above all else." There follows a long discussion of the anthropological debate on the exchange of women, after which Grace concludes that Baudrillard is right to stress that underlying practices of sacrifice and exchange is a reversibility fundamental to human culture, and she advocates with Baudrillard the principle of seduction for "[r]eversion traverses all 'sexes' in their non-essentialist appearance and disappearance" (171). Her argument at this point takes Baudrillard into the heart of feminist positions, for she suggests that: If women are associated with seduction, and seduction is annihilated (along with the possibility of sacrifice to ensure reversion), then men are relentlessly consigned to 'identity' with no relief, exposed on all sides, fully positivised, a kind of pornography of masculinity that has erased its only

possibility of transformation and death. This must engender its own form of madness (171).

At the beginning of the book the reader is informed that chapter six, entitled "Feminism and the Power of Dissolution," looks at the implication of Baudrillard's theory of symbolic exchange and seduction for feminism and poses the question anew: What is the nature of patriarchy? But in fact it begins with a long presentation of Baudrillard first on Saussure's analysis of anagrams (172-178), then on his consideration of Freud (178-180), showing the effectiveness of reversibility in language and in the theory of the unconscious. In the last few pages of the book, (180-192), Grace finishes with a look at Baudrillard's notion of cool seduction, "shadowing the object" (Sophie Calle), and what she calls the "dissolution of power and meaning in the illusion of the real" entailing a critical reading of the work of Donna Haraway (188-190). The conclusion Grace reaches is to reject all (feminist) positions which rest on "identities" and she suggests that the great force of feminism is to be able to "dissolve power and meaning through the reversion of their illusion" and this "is to dissolve ontology of any essence; to return it to the symbolic order of appearances" (192).

The way Grace has developed her ideas around Baudrillard could be said to reduce Baudrillard's position to a rather formal and theoretical point about reversibility, symbolic exchange, and identity. This would, against Grace's own intention, rather reduce also the significance of Baudrillard's challenge which is probably more profound and more difficult to deal with. At the heart of this challenge is Baudrillard's thesis of the fundamental significance of radical alterity to human culture. Whereas for example Simone de Beauvoir saw in radical alterity the main weapon used to humble women into the status of the "second sex," Baudrillard sees in the annihilation of radical alterity a far more insidious form of control and subordination, and as Grace shows has disastrous effects on traditional patriarchy. For Baudrillard there is incompatibility between a movement based on consumer liberation and human rights, and one based on otherness. The former is consistent and complicit with modern society, the latter is the genuinely radical alternative. The problem with Baudrillard's position is that his model for gender alterity is anthropological, and as Grace shows, there is considerable evidence to show that in primitive societies, powers of feminine seduction are dangerous and effective. Even in the aristocratic courts of Europe strong and dangerous forms of seduction were in evidence. Baudrillard's contempt is for the romantic bourgeois ethic of woman as mirror image of man. Feminism in this perspective is a product of "male hysteria," not a genuine movement of emancipation. Baudrillard prefers the primitive, the age-old pattern of radical otherness and cruel forms of seduction, of fatal strategy, and the genuine action of destiny. Grace does not really attempt to push this line of thinking to the point of articulating a specific form of feminism based on radical alterity, for it would mean opposition to all efforts for social equality. In truth this is virtually unthinkable as a form of feminism.

Baudrillard is an extreme thinker, but he has never claimed his thought is "feminist" or shown interest in a reconstruction of traditional masculinity, indeed he has evinced horror at the thought of projects to create a "new man." He opposes, as Grace shows, democratisation as a dictatorial form, one which eliminates symbolic forms more surely and consistently than any holocaust, and in so doing also creates sexism, sexual discrimination, harassment, etc., for these simply do not exist where radical otherness is the dominant form of symbolic order. They are among the problems of modernity to which Baudrillard responds by looking for friends who are allied with the fatal, the pure object. Grace's book dresses up these ideas as attractive theses for feminists to think about, but she stops short of formulating a symbolic practice that puts them into the extreme, and cruel, manifesto they would have to have. Probably this is a wise course for Baudrillard's notion of the place of women in society is modelled on Hindu, Islamic, or eighteenth-century European cultures, but what the equivalent of these ritual and ceremonial forms might be neither Baudrillard nor Grace have yet told us. Baudrillardian feminism here is still-born.

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