

Imperfect, saggy animals

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[FIGURE TO BE INSERTED]

This is a reproduction of the centrefold of the September 1977 edition of *Le Magazine Littéraire*ⁱ. The cover had promised a look at 'Twenty years of philosophy in France.' We see an apparent genealogy of the flows of influence between older thinkers and contemporary French philosophers. There is a split between ancient Greece influence and German idealism, and Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud are the prime triumvirate. There are certain movements and approaches identified near key figures: Marxism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, epistemology, linguistics, existentialism, and structuralism. It is structuralism which marks the half-way stage with Saussure feeding into Levi-Strauss, who feeds into (Alain de) Benoist, Foucault, Serres, and Althusser. Some lineages might strike us as strange, and only Sartre and Lyotard are seen to be influenced by the core troika. There are some glaring and jarring omissions – no women (no De Beauvoir, Cixous, Kristeva...), and there are some glaring and jarring additions – the full roster of the *nouveaux philosophes*. Presumably those such as Levinas, Laruelle, Blanchot, Badiou, Nancy, etc., were yet to make a splash. One should not mistake this representation – which is in the service of promotion and a publishing houseⁱⁱ – for the real. However, there is an interesting anomaly here: the figure of Baudrillard.

Near the bottom, centre-right, Baudrillard in a box seems to float free of all lines and arrows of influence. Unlike all the other figures he alone, apparently influenced by no one and, in turn, influences no one. He is both inside and outside French philosophy, free from factions and genealogical ties to develop his thought. This is the year after *Forget Foucault* and other such provocationsⁱⁱⁱ, which might explain the severing of all ties. Whatever, the case remains that in this family tree of French philosophy there is no place for Baudrillard and yet he cannot be excluded. He is homeless, outside, an orphan or otherwise without family ties. "We are the orphans of a reality that came too late."^{iv}

This is a rather unnecessarily long winded way of trying to say thank you to Gerry Coulter for founding and running *the International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* – a home for outsiders and orphans. Rightly or wrongly, imaginary or not, at times everyone feels embattled. With the IJBS it felt as if there was a home. I only knew Gerry Coulter through reading his work and exchanging email and for me it was an encouraging, honest, witty and progressive relationship. He wrote about Baudrillard and associated themes with a confidence that I have yet to muster, and rather than a watered-down, bloodless, and vague figure, his Baudrillard was dynamic and pungent.

An appropriate place to begin to consider Gerry Coulter's work would be his own writings on the passing of certain thinkers and artists in the irregular 'Passings' obituaries in the IJBS. Here we see Coulter in full flight as a public intellectual but with a critical purview on the supposed responsibility and demands of the intellectual. In appraising Susan Sontag, he considers that her "failure to intellectually engage Baudrillard's criticism [on her 'humanitarian' visit to Sarajevo] is to be remembered as a sad chapter in an otherwise engaging intellectual life." (Coulter 2005b) Coulter then asks, "Is it not breadth and depth that most characterize the intellectual?" (Coulter 2005b) Coulter exacted and exhibited such breadth and depth in his own work and this is never more apparent than in the 'Passings' sections. The series sees Coulter critically consider figures from philosophy such as Jacques Derrida (Coulter 2005a), Murray Bookchin (Coulter 2007), and Richard Rorty (Coulter 2008), writers Harold Pinter (Coulter 2009a), J.G. Ballard (Coulter 2009b) and J. D. Salinger (Coulter 2011c), master of war Robert McNamara (Coulter 2010a), anthropologist Claude

Levi-Strauss (Coulter 2010b), and artists Louise Bourgeois (Coulter 2011a), Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon (Coulter 2011b), Lucian Freud (Coulter 2012a) and Helen Frankenthaler (2012b). Such breadth and depth of purview and focus does indeed characterise Coulter as an all too rare intellectual.

Often there was a pretext to the 'Passings' series, such as an examination of one of Baudrillard's ideas in relation to the passing considered, or a score, of sorts, to settle. The aforementioned Sontag, who is from "the country with the most developed anti-intellectual tradition on the planet" (Coulter 2005b) is chastised for her "lack of a proper reply to Baudrillard (she continued to be content with name calling)." (Coulter 2005b) Richard Rorty, likewise, is rebuked for his "sophomoric assessment" and his writing off "both Baudrillard and Jameson with a single stroke of condescension in *Achieving Our Country*." (Coulter 2008) Here Coulter admits that "Spending a lot of time in Baudrillard's texts can (and did in me) breed a deep dissatisfaction for more domesticated thinkers." (Coulter 2008) Why the widespread reluctance to take Baudrillard's work seriously? "*An hypothesis: The ability to take Baudrillard seriously is directly linked to the ability first, to take Nietzsche seriously.* I think it is among the more likely hypotheses which might eventually help us to understand the widespread American reluctance toward Baudrillard and his challenging form of thought." (Coulter 2008)

Harold Pinter valued, as did Coulter, "enigma and uncertainty" and used "the theatre not to entertain (in the traditional sense), but to challenge" (Coulter 2009a). Pinter understood "the role of the playwright as a kind of counter-cultural surveillance operative against the state, culture, and community." (Coulter 2009a) However, complains Coulter, there was a late life capitulation from his art to the real. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech Pinter offered a powerful but legitimate criticism of the United States. However, in doing so, "he also did something almost unthinkable – he forgot the lessons of his own art....What remains incomprehensible to me is how someone who understood, since childhood, human weakness so well, could suddenly expect politicians to act in some superhuman manner." (Coulter 2009a) The ecological thinker and activist Murray Bookchin is considered by Coulter with a wider question: "How does one live a political life among the ruins of the transpolitical?" (Coulter 2007) Answer: "One doesn't, really – not a very satisfying one at least." (Coulter 2007)

Robert McNamara's career saw a seamless series of moves from the World War Two Office of Statistical Control to managerial advice at Ford Motor Cars to Vietnam War mongering - Secretary of Defense – and to President of the World Bank. His admission that towards the end of World War Two that the U.S. was behaving as a war criminal allows a consideration of war and geopolitics as potlatch and challenge. As Coulter chillingly has it: "In 1944 when the bombing of civilian populations was being perpetrated on an unprecedented scale, long after it was understood that they were not significantly advancing the war effort toward victory – I believe they continued as an expression of evil. The message was clear to Japan, Italy, and Germany – you may be evil – but we are capable of as much evil, or more, than you are. When we reflect on the defeat of the Nazis and the measures taken in this victory we would do well acknowledge that the Nazi evil was defeated because, as it only could be, it encountered an enemy more evil than itself.... Hardliners in the Islamic and Arab worlds who favour Jihadist terrorism today as a response to Western globalization might pause to reflect the reserves of evil flowing through Western societies. This Evil is perhaps the West's most strategic reserve – almost a secret even to ourselves and only a few ever speak its name." (Coulter 2010a) As if on cue, as I write in April 2017, the U.S., under the aegis of Trump – a loud mouth who speaks the name of evil if ever there was one - has dropped its largest non-nuclear weapon ever used in combat against apparent Isis targets in Afghanistan.

Derrida, whose “writing isn’t so much about writing as about thinking – and thinking about thinking and the hard and joyous labour that thinking about thinking is” (Coulter 2005a) is used to make a pedagogical point: “He made us more aware of things we were protecting our students from and for this reason some have sought to protect their students from him.” (Coulter 2005a) Bookchin is also explored with pedagogy in mind: “Many professors on both Right and Left protected us from Bookchin and Baudrillard. After all, we were in the business of developing and proclaiming ourselves to be ‘critical theorists’ so what use could writers such as Bookchin or Baudrillard serve? They were both to remain insider-outsiders in academe as both men asked too many awkward questions.” (Coulter 2007)

Coulter’s writing in ‘Passings’ reveals a poetic style, wit, and joy in thinking. J.G. Ballard is described as writing “against the banal moulding of collective consciousness in a way that challenged the mental and visual horizons of readers” and who wrote well on surveillance, “the oldest and still most powerful version of which are two eyes peering from behind a curtain” (Coulter 2009b) Claude Levi-Strauss had “the kind of intellectual curiosity driven by a respect for alterity and a disgust for globalized culture or any kind of one-world monoculture.” (Coulter 2010b) Both Levi-Strauss and Baudrillard pointed out that “the contemporary obsession for difference among white Europeans pointed to a very subtle kind of racism. These white Europeans are far more diverse and ‘mixed’ than any of the world’s tribes they are so pleased to exalt for their difference.” (Coulter 2010b) Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon (and Christo) “seemed to share with many leading theorists the idea that we do not know the real but merely the appearances behind which it hides” (Coulter 2011b) J.D. Salinger “was a modern artist who’s concern was the individual in the artificiality of modern culture....Holden Caulfield’s enduring fame rests on how well he gave voice to the suspicion, widely held, that the entire project of modernity was, a kind of catastrophe in slow motion in which we are trapped.” (Coulter 2011c) Helen Frankenthaler “became a thoughtful and highly articulate analyst of the poststructural nature of abstraction and the problem of art generally” (Coulter 2012b) Lucien Freud’s work “calls upon us to appreciate the melancholy creature we are as much as it calls on us to admire the technical skill of the painter....Throughout a time when humanity became increasingly obsessed with unreal bodies - from wafer thin models to the outcome of muscular self-experiments in supplements and steroids - he remained interested in painting people as they usually happen to be – the imperfect, saggy animals which appear daily in our bathroom mirrors.” (Coulter 2012a)

For Coulter, “Art also provided [Louise] Bourgeois with a non-violent way to channel her deep reservoir of anger.” (Coulter 2011a) Coulter also discerns anger in Sontag’s “early tantrums against Baudrillard” (Coulter 2005b) and her “brief and angry rejection” (Coulter 2005b). Further, “I knew Murray Bookchin only through his writings and interviews and in these I found his temperament to me characterized by anger. Ours is a coolly indifferent time that can only be met with an even greater cool indifference.” (Coulter 2007) The ‘Passings’ section of the IJBS reveal Coulter to be an intellectual^v and against anger. In other words, a cool intellectual.

In what now counts as our final email exchange I had invited Gerry Coulter to contribute to the Baudrillard, Theology, Religion edition of the IJBS that he had kindly allowed myself and James Walters to produce. “I’ll give it some thought,” he replied. I imagine, if he had contributed, that he’d have invoked and celebrated the theme of the desert, which “allows us, ever so briefly, to imagine the world in our absence.”^{vi} In the final pages of his great book on Baudrillard, he writes that “Few people enjoy the freedom of the desert as did Baudrillard. Nonetheless, these vast spaces have also inspired religions steeped in dread. The three great machines of social control: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are born of the desert. They stand as potent denials of the sovereignty of the desert which

will remain long after the last religion has perished. The desert comes as close as anything we know to the perfect crime against religion and turns its back on human prayers. The desert is the earth's anti-prayer to the cosmos."^{vii} Perhaps. And yet in the hospitality afforded by Coulter in the IJBS and elsewhere he is close to the biblical command that rivetted Levinas, to be responsible to those who most need our help: the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and the poor. In a quite remarkable piece Marine Baudrillard has talked about the death of her husband Jean Baudrillard. She begins with a worthy reminder that can conclude this piece.

We must not talk about others, we must talk to others.

We must not talk about the dead, we must talk to the dead.

All our troubles come from having lost contact. – Marine Baudrillard^{viii}

Coulter, G. (2005a) Passings: Taking Derrida Seriously. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 2.1 http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol2_1/derrida.htm

Coulter, G. (2005b) Passings: Cool Memories of Susan Sontag: An American Intellectual. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 2.2 http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol2_2/coulter.htm

Coulter, G. (2007) Passings: Murray Bookchin – A Political Philosopher Among the Ruins of the Transpolitical. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 4.2 http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol4_2/v4-2-gcoulter.html

Coulter, G. (2008) Passings: Richard Rorty and the Voluntary Servitude of Philosophy. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 5.1 http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol5_1/v5-1-article1-coulter.html

Coulter, G. (2009a) Passings – Harold Pinter: Forgetting What Art Knows. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 6.2 http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol-6_2/v6-2-passings-pinter.html

Coulter, G. (2009b) Passings – J. G. Ballard: Philosopher of the Future Present. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 6.2 http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol-6_2/v6-2-passings-ballard.html

Coulter, G. (2010a) Passings - Robert McNamara – To Speak The Name Of Evil. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 7.1 http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol-7_1/v7-1-mcnamara.html

Coulter, G. (2010b) Passings: Claude Levi-Strauss. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 7.2 http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol-7_2/v7-2-levistrauss.html

Coulter, G. (2011a) Passings: Louise Bourgeois. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 8.1 http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol-8_1/v8-1-bourgeois.html

Coulter, G. (2011b) Passings: Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 8.1 http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol-8_1/v8-1-Jeanne-Claude.html

Coulter, G. (2011c) Passings: J. D. Salinger. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 8.1 http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol-8_1/v8-1-salinger.html

Coulter, G. (2012a) Passings: Lucian Freud – Against the Grain. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 9.1 http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol-9_1/v9-1-coulterfreud.html

Coulter, G. (2012b) Passings: Helen Frankenthaler – Safest When At Risk. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 9.2 http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol9_2/v9-2-coulterhelen.html

ⁱ *Le Magazine Littéraire* is a French monthly literature magazine, founded in 1966, with a current circulation of around 20,000. In recent months Heidegger, Molière, Badinter, Verlaine and Rimbaud have featured on the glossy cover. I would like to thank Richard Smith and David Clarke for allowing me to include this representation, which features in their introduction to a new collection of Baudrillard interviews. Smith and Clarke write that “What is striking is that Baudrillard is already visualised as entirely disconnected from the network: out of the game, unplugged, with no arrows connecting him to any other thinker.” (Smith, R.G. & Clarke, D.B. ‘Introduction: Baudrillard Unplugged’, in Smith, RG & Clarke, DB eds. *Jean Baudrillard: the Disappearance of Culture, Uncollected Interviews*. Edinburgh University Press, 2017: 2) I would also like to thank Christopher Watkin, whose blog features the diagram from *Le Magazine Littéraire*: <http://christopherwatkin.com/2016/02/15/a-diagrammatic-snapshot-of-french-philosophy-from-magazine-litteraire-september-1977/>

I interview Christopher on his book *Difficult Atheism* for the Baudrillard, Theology, Religion special edition of the IJBS due in 2018.

ⁱⁱ According to Michael Scott Christofferson, “In 1973 he [Bernard-Henri Levy] arrived at the apolitical, commercial publisher Grasset...After discussing his own projects for books, Levy who knew nothing about publishing at the time, was offered the position of director of a book collection for Grasset. Levy asked his friends, many of whom had been students with him...for book proposals and had twenty within two weeks, all of which were accepted by the publisher...For Grasset, Levy was a link to the younger, 1968 generation of writers and readers. For Levy, Grasset was the fast track to power within French intellectual life. Together they would attempt to sell their new authors under the rubric 'new philosophy.' New philosophy was, like the 'new novel' before it, the creation of a promotional campaign... *Le Magazine Littéraire* vigorously promoted the books of its owner's publishing house, to the extent of publishing a flow chart of the 'Inter-fluences de la philosophie contemporaine' in which the new philosophers appeared as the sole inheritors (with the exception of the Althusserians Etienne Balibar and Lecourt) of the French philosophical tradition.” (*French Intellectuals against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s*, New York: Berghahn, 2004: 192) Baudrillard, to the consternation of some, would later publish with Grasset.

ⁱⁱⁱ “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 there has been a hyper-reaction to my work and from that point of view I have succeeded.” Jean Baudrillard. “‘Politics of Seduction’: Interview with Suzanne Moore and Stephen Johnstone.” *Marxism Today*. January 1989:54.

^{iv} Jean Baudrillard (1995) *Radical Thought*.

<https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14663/5533>

^v One who would share Baudrillard’s unease with the term and supposed responsibility of the intellectual: “There is division of labour that should be respected. Even if there are any intellectuals left - and I am not sure I am one of them, even if I appear to share in such a life, appear to share a specific discourse - I do not share in that complicity of intellectuals who perceive themselves as responsible for "something", as privileged with a sort of conscience-radicalness used to be the privilege of intellectuals and now it has been moved on to another space. Subjects such as Susan Sontag cannot intervene anymore, even symbolically, but once again this is not a prognosis or diagnosis.” (in Coulter 2005b)

^{vi} Gerry Coulter 'Baudrillard In The Desert' in *Jean Baudrillard: From the Ocean to the Desert, or the Poetics of Radicality*. Intertheory Press, 2012: 177

^{vii} Gerry Coulter 'Baudrillard In The Desert' in *Jean Baudrillard: From the Ocean to the Desert, or the Poetics of Radicality*. Intertheory Press, 2012: 179

^{viii} Marine Baudrillard 'Poetic Transfer of a (Serious) Situation' in Katharina Niemeyer (Ed.) *Media and nostalgia: yearning for the past, present and future*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014: 224