Barthes, Roland: *French structuralist and poststructuralist thinker, critic, linguist and semiotician, 1915–80*

Barthes's career is an exemplary one for this book. In close to three decades, he moves through many of the main intellectual currents of his time and place, and does it in an often thoroughly idiosyncratic way. Though he does not often name his contemporaries, the debts and homages are obvious; his work is alive with theirs, echoing, taking up and playing with their ideas with the stylistic virtuosity that is Barthes's signature.

One of his later books, *Roland Barthes*, gives his own view of his career to that point (1977b: 145). He began, like so many of his generation, as a broadly Sartrean Marxist, but by the time of the book that first brought him to general notice, *Mythologies* (1972 [Fr. 1957]), his project had become a much more Brechtian one of ideological demystification of the familiar. *Mythologies* brought together a series of short pieces he had been writing regularly for *Les Lettres nouvelles* on aspects of popular **culture** (ads for soap powders and margarine, Charlie Chaplin, food photography, Einstein's brain, wrestling …), and rounded them off with a new, long essay, "Myth Today." This essay is in turn something rather different: his first major foray into structuralist thought, and an attempt to imagine a general **semiotics** that might underlie the often impressionistic analyses of the pieces that precede it. Over the next decade, he would follow this up with some of the classic texts of structuralism: *Elements of Semiology* (1967 [Fr. 1964]), a book of first principles; "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of

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Narratives" (in Barthes 1977a [Fr. 1966]); and *The Fashion System* (Barthes, 1985 [Fr. 1967]). Their method, as he begins by saying in the essay on narrative, is top down: because it's simply impossible to study all narratives and work upwards to an inductive synthesis, we start with

> a deductive procedure, obliged first to devise a hypothetical model of description (what American linguists call a "theory") and then gradually to work down from this model towards the different narrative species which at once conform to and depart from the model. (Barthes, 1977a: 81)

The danger of such an approach is that it can be pre-emptive. The essay on narrative is still suggestive, with its loose synthesis of all sorts of recent work into a framework for elaboration. But *The Fashion System* now looks particularly like a dead end: every possible move seems already there in the "minor scientific delirium" of its combinatories, as he will later describe it (Barthes, 1977b: 145), and so we have that odd and paradoxical thing, an exhaustive and exhausting book on fashion that can say nothing at all about the new.

At the same time that he is producing these high-structuralist analyses, however, Barthes is also working on a series of writings that take quite different directions. In particular, there are the well-known polemic "The Death of the Author" (1968, in Barthes, 1977a), the brief and rich "From Work to Text" (1971, in Barthes, 1977a), and the extraordinary *S/Z* (1970). In them, we see Barthes move from structural*ism* to what will become a multiplicity of poststructural*ist* investigations (**poststructuralism**).

S/Z is a book-length slow-motion reading of a Balzac short story, "Sarrasine." At first sight, it looks like a rather idiosyncratic form of structuralism. Barthes starts by saying that he will break the text up into a "series of brief, contiguous fragments," which he calls *lexias* (1970: 13). But these lexias are not syntagms, like sentences, products of the application of rules of syntax to a vocabulary. They're not structural, in other words, and this is no longer quite semiotics. There's something quite arbitrary about them: "sometimes a few words, sometimes several sentences" (1970: 13), whatever works best. As the name suggests, these bite-sized pieces are more like the grouping one does in the act of *reading* than they are like units of structure. Playing across each of these lexias will be several *codes*. Where it's a matter of raising a question in the narrative, articulating it with other features, delaying or giving an answer, Barthes proposes the term *hermeneutic* code (see **Eco**); where they refer out to common bodies of knowledge, we have

a *cultural* or *knowledge* code; and so on. And again, neither are these codes structural: they're not units that are put together in the text, or rules for putting units together, they just name groups of effects that the words of the text have, directions they point in. And the five of them Barthes names here will, he says, be enough for this one. Presumably if we were describing a different sort of text altogether—a scientific paper, say, or a piece of legislation—we'd find it useful to bring in others, and mightn't need all of the original five.

What this mobile and flexible apparatus allows Barthes to do is trace through the unexpected vicissitudes of the story, taken a couple of lexias at a time with short interspersing commentaries. Rather than focus, as he does in the earlier structuralist piece, on the ways in which this story might be seen as the product of a formal system that can generate stories in all their variety, *S/Z* pays attention to the sheer singularity of this one story in particular, in its gradual unfolding across the time of its reading. He makes a distinction between what he calls the *readerly* work and the *writerly* text: in the former, the reader is addressed as a consumer, in the latter as an active co-producer of the text. It's tempting to see the readerly as the familiar routines of the realist novel, with the writerly being the more stringent demands of the avant-garde text. It's more accurate, however, to say that this is not so much a way of classifying literary objects (readerly works on one shelf, comfortably in reach; writerly texts on a shelf that's somewhat more difficult to get at), but as a sort of optic for viewing any literary object: look at it one way, and it might be familiar readerly realism, but look at it another way and you've got something quite different and unfamiliar.

And indeed, that's what we get here. Balzac is, after all, the epitome of a familiar mode of literary realism, a canonic author taught in schools – though it's unlikely that any curriculum would choose *this* particular story. Once we've read *S/Z*, though, "Sarrasine" looks as unfamiliar as anything from the avant-garde. What *S/Z* does is *queer* "Sarrasine," in all sorts of ways. If an important part of the comfort offered by the readerly is its reassuring management of sexual difference (and the so-called "marriage plot" is after all one of the genres at the heart of the classical novel), then *S/Z* shows a "Sarrasine" in which those anxieties implode. We see it in the title, where we have the "feminine" *S* that is nevertheless the initial of a man, the naïve Sarrasine who comes to Rome to learn to be a sculptor; and the "masculine" *Z* that marks the name of La Zambinella, the beautiful soprano with whom he falls in love on his first night at the opera. And between them, at the heart of the story, we have the slash of castration, for in his innocence Sarrasine has not realized that at this time all female parts on the Italian stage are still

sung by castrati, as the church does not allow women on the stage. It's also the slash of death, his own death, for when he finds out the truth, Sarrasine will try to kill first Zambinella, then himself, only to be killed by a slash of the sword from the Cardinal who is Zambinella's lover and protector. And to multiply things out into **metanarrative**, the entire story is framed by the first-person narration of a failed heterosexual seduction at a lavish party: everything falls apart when the narrator tells the Sarrasine story to his companion, after her eye is caught by the entrance of a remarkable figure—none other than the now very old and no longer beautiful Zambinella. What "Sarrasine" traces out under Barthes's patient and spectacular reading is the death of narrative itself, at whose heart there is not the resolution of a marriage of opposites or complements, but the impossibility, as **Lacan** will say repeatedly, of the sexual relation. "The narratives of the world are numberless," as the first line of "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" has it (Barthes, 1977a: 79). If the structuralist analysis of narrative suggests the plenitude of a system that is capable of generating infinite variety, then, with *S/Z*, narrative proliferates because of the slash of irreducible difference at the heart of it.

In one way or another, all of Barthes's later work turns from the global systematizing and grand narratives of structure to the more localized and less calculable effects of such singularities at the heart of all **discourse**. The "intertexts" that he names for these later writings in his summary in *Roland Barthes* are now no longer Sartre, Marx, Brecht and Saussure, but his contemporaries Philippe Sollers, Kristeva, **Derrida**, Lacan, and with them their great precursor, Nietzsche. *The Pleasure of the Text* (Barthes, 1975) deals with the paradoxical ways in which the *jouissance* of reading cuts across regimes of meaning, as a "sanctioned Babel" (1975: 3), a seduction that is also a wounding (1975: 38) to the extent that it lays bare the instabilities of the reading subject. *Camera Lucida* (1981) similarly speaks of the power of photography as lying not so much in its informational semiotics of meaning (which he calls its *studium*) as in the singular point or *punctum*, the small sometimes throwaway detail that barely belongs to that web of meaning but which stabs one to the heart. *A Lover's Discourse* (1978) hinges on the paradox of the singularity and intensity of the lover's experience and the necessary banality of the lover's vocabulary: what, after all, could be more banal yet more necessary than "I love you"? And *Roland Barthes* (1977b) itself is not so much a memoir as a meditation on memoir, testimony and writing a life; on what it means to say "I" in a text, and on signature and its effects—and thus the obvious antidote to the rather silly and hasty reading of

"The Death of the Author" as an embargo on discussion of authorship. The very form of the later books, like Nietzsche's, becomes aphoristic, fragmentary, sometimes even abandoned to the vicissitudes of an alphabetical ordering.

Tony Thwaites

Baudrillard, Jean: *French cultural theorist, 1929–2007*

Like David Bowie, to whom he has been compared (Poole, 2000), Baudrillard's work is notable for its many ch-ch-ch-ch-changes. From around the mid-1980s onward he became both a poster boy for postmodern theory and one of its most scandalous figures, the seeming "poetics" of his later work exemplifying the version of postmodernism parodied in the **Sokal affair**. Not even the editor of Baudrillard's *Selected Writings*, Mark Poster, however, himself a figure of some renown in postmodern and **new media** studies, could defend what he saw as Baudrillard's worst excesses, describing his early writing style as "hyperbolic and declarative" and accusing him of "refusing to qualify or delimit his claims" (Poster, 'Introduction', in Baudrillard, 1988a: 7). In scientific circles, meanwhile, Baudrillard's name stood for the perception that humanities scholarship had been corroded by vacuous jargon masking a lack of reasoned, evidence-based argument; indeed, what "Baudrillard" fostered was the retreat from reason altogether. US mathematician Alan Sokal and Belgian physicist Jean Bricmont thus find in Baudrillard's writing "a profusion of scientific terms"'serving only "to give an appearance of profundity to trite observations" (Sokal and Bricmont, 1998: 153), an assessment countersigned by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his review of Sokal and Bricmont's book for *Nature* (Dawkins, 1988). Nor is criticism of his work restricted to the natural sciences: British **Derrida** scholar Christopher Norris, for example, dismisses Baudrillard's later work as typical of the "bad philosophy" that postmodernism commits in "its uncritical adherence to a theory of language and **representation** whose extreme antirealist or sceptical bias in the end gives rise to an outlook of thoroughgoing nihilism" (Norris, 1992: 191).

Norris's complaints are directed at the third and last of Baudrillard's articles on the first Gulf War, an event that he famously claimed didn't happen. Written originally for European newspapers in 1991, expanded versions of the articles were later published as a book whose English translation,

The Gulf War Did Not Take Place, appeared in 1995. While the title may indicate a species of Holocaust denial, in fact Baudrillard's argument is that events in the Persian Gulf at the time didn't constitute a "war," but rather an atrocity dressed up to look like one. How could what took place qualify as a war when the resources of the US-led Coalition forces so vastly outweighed those of Iraq that, from the American perspective, "everything unfolded according to programmatic order" (Baudrillard, 1995: 73)? How could there have been a war when there could have been "[n]o accidents" (1995: 73)? Thus what took place was actually a media event staged as a real-time conflict for propaganda purposes, a "war" produced for American TV audiences. "We prefer the exile of the virtual, of which television is the universal mirror," Baudrillard writes, "to the catastrophe of the real" (1995: 28).

"We" postmoderns, then, prefer the condition of being in exile, a condition made possible by technologies of the virtual, to an experience of the catastrophic effects of reality. A catastrophe, however, denotes not only a calamitous event or a failure, but also the scene of resolution in classical tragedy; in ancient Greek, the catastrophic marked the point of narrative closure. But there is no equivalent of this when it comes to television, a medium that is irreducible to the screening of texts or objects in the form of individual programs and which is therefore permanently ongoing and perpetually in the now. Television is always "there," always "on," even when we aren't watching it, and what's on is always changing—a feature that today is greatly expanded or intensified by the Internet. Technologies of the virtual thus effect our exile from "the real" understood as closure, teleological certainty or the **transcendental signified**; and because reality is not simply a philosophical abstraction but also a social domain, such technologies offer escapist protection from "the brutalizing effects of rationality, normative socialization, and universal conditioning" associated with the real (Baudrillard, 1993b: 67).

Gaming is a good example. When I'm inside the open world of *Assassin's Creed II*, trying to bring the Desmond-Ezio plot to resolution, I am in a sense voluntarily in exile from the real, a realm governed by a political–economic imperative, if not also a moral imperative, to be productive. Gaming is not productive in anything resembling the "real" sense of this notion: all that is "produced" when I play *Assassin's Creed II* or any other game is my exile from the real, a mode of virtual production at best and which is also a product of my desire or will (remember that, for Baudrillard, we *prefer* the openness of the virtual). From mode to code, as it were. Thus gaming shows what Baudrillard calls the *reversibility* of a concept such as productivity, this

being a logic or a strategy of disruption against the normalizing forces of the real. "Inject the smallest dose of reversibility," as he puts it, "into our economic, political, sexual, or institutional mechanisms and everything collapses" (Baudrillard, 1990: 47). If real time is spent productively, game time is spent in the pursuit of all but nothing: the gamer's purpose is to master a game that, once finished, is effectively obsolete, having been or about to be replaced by the latest version in a series (*Assassin's Creed III* was released in the US on October 30, 2012) or by the latest must-have game for sale. Like television, the game is always "on."

Democracy, Baudrillard notes, is based on equality before the law, "but that is never as radical as equality before the rule" (Baudrillard, 2001: 66). Everyone is equal before the algorithm. But such equality comes at the cost of a radical freedom, since the freedom to choose in game space is limited in advance by the rules of the game. Freedom, then, along with exile, is a **simulation** of the game: the gamer is never absolutely free, and never absolutely in exile from the real. Hence the reversibility that games enable is at best only an ambivalent force, especially if we were to think of games as commodities for staving off boredom. As McKenzie Wark argues:

> The interests of the military entertainment complex dominate policy, and policy's goal is to alleviate the threat of boredom. What is good for the military entertainment complex is good for America. And what is pronounced good is the war on boredom, which, like the war on drugs or the war on crime or the war on terror, can never be won—was never meant to be won—and is merely displaced, as the boredom index rises and falls. (Wark, 2007: 175).

The point here is that there's nothing that could count as the political or some other **essence** of gaming. Games are still commodities, and gamers are still subjects under capitalism. While it *can* be argued that games open a space for exile from the real, it can also be argued that that space has been coopted by capitalism as a relatively new means of turning a profit.

But the twist is that games may be seen as more real than the real itself. If reality requires our belief in it, gaming doesn't: I am not required to *believe in* the open world of *Assassin's Creed II*, but simply to move around in it within limits set by the rules of the game. My "freedom" to do so is both compromised and illusory. But isn't this how I move around in the world "outside" the game, within limits set by the laws of society? Should I transgress those laws I would be held accountable for my antisocial behavior regardless of whether I *believed* in "society" as such; my belief, in

other words, is neither here nor there. So what the **hyperreal** or prosthetic environment of the game may reveal about technologies of the virtual is not that they are taking us away from "ourselves," but that they're taking us on an adventure:

> Perhaps we may see this [the technologization of the real] as a kind of adventure, a heroic test: to take the artificialization of living beings as far as possible in order to see, finally, what part of human nature survives the greatest ordeal. If we discover that not everything can be cloned, simulated, programmed, genetically and neurologically managed, then whatever survives could be truly called "human": some inalienable and indestructible human quality could finally be identified. Of course, there is always the risk, in this experimental adventure, that nothing will pass the test—that the human will be permanently eradicated. (Baudrillard, 2000: 15–16)

For Baudrillard, the scene of this adventure goes back further than the digital age. In his *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981 [Fr. 1971]) he argues that the process of "artificialization" is a feature of modern industrial society, making hyperreality more or less coextensive with **modernity**. While conceding that the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism is an attempt to "get" this process, Baudrillard maintains that what prevents it from doing so is the inadequacy of the Marxist distinction between use-value (the utility of an object) and exchange-value (the commodification of an object expressed as a market price). The inadequacy proceeds from a failure to acknowledge the **semiotic** nature of objects under capitalism: "in the 'fetishist' theory of consumption … objects are given and received everywhere as force dispensers (happiness, health, security, prestige, etc.)," Baudrillard writes, but this forgets that "what we are dealing with first is signs: a generalized code of signs, a totally arbitrary code of differences" (1981: 91). Fetishism, in short, presupposes a real that is prior and a subject whose consciousness is non-alienated, but for Baudrillard there is no outside the generalized code of signs through which reality and subjectivity are always mediated:

> If fetishism exists it is thus not a fetishism of the signified, a fetishism of substances and values (called ideological), which the fetish object would incarnate for the alienated subject. Behind this reinterpretation (which is truly ideological) it is a *fetishism of the signifier*. That is to say that the subject is trapped in the factitious, differential, encoded, systematized aspect of the object. It is not the passion (whether of objects or subjects) for substances that speaks in fetishism, it is the *passion for the code* […]. (Baudrillard, 1981: 92)

It's in this context that the Gulf War may be said to have happened only in the televisualization (the artificialization) of an event that was therefore of the order of a non-event, an "event" that could be said to constitute a war only in its *signification* or at the level of the signifier. The "war" was produced in its conformity to the *appearances* of war (explosions, air strikes, combat uniforms, etc.), which of course is not to deny that tens of thousands of people died.

In postmodernity, reality is thus superseded by its appearances. This is perhaps the key to Baudrillard's writing and its scandalous reception, given the offence to common sense caused by such a statement. But if the task of serious criticism is to look *behind* appearances for the real, then what hope for "serious" criticism today if reality is now indistinguishable from its forms of manifestation? "Interpretation overlooks and obliterates this aspect of appearances in its search for hidden meaning," according to Baudrillard 1988a: 149), but "getting beyond appearances is an impossible task" (1988a: 150). Because the pursuit of hidden meaning blinds traditional criticism or theory to the **truth** about postmodernism (which is that "truth" is to be found on and not below the surface of things), theory must abandon its commitment to a scientific or realist mode of inquiry in favor of experimenting with new modes of relation to a world in which historical events, outstripping the capacity of **metanarratives** to explain them, increasingly resemble those of science fiction. Only by acknowledging the "impossibility of reconciling theory with the real" (Baudrillard, 1988b: 99) can we begin to respond to such a world. Hence the move towards what Baudrillard calls "theory-fiction" (or sometimes "anticipatory theory" or "simulation theory") in his later writing, where the scandalous drive to speculate overrides the critical imperative to be systematic; a move akin to **Lyotard**'s call to do philosophy differently for the sake of doing justice to the **differend**.

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