

DOUBLING BAUDRILLARD:

An Appreciation of Gerry Coulter's Writings on Architecture

Gerry Coulter is best known as one of the most outstanding Baudrillard scholars, along with being the founder of the innovative and free-access *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* (2004). His recently released book, *Jean Baudrillard: From the Ocean to the Desert* (2012), which complements his thorough and astonishing life-long interest in Baudrillard's *oeuvre*, has been universally acclaimed for both the originality of its methodology and for shedding new light on neglected aspects of Baudrillard's writings. Coulter's ability to read through "Baudrillard's own concepts and convictions" makes him a credible and influential interpreter of Baudrillard's work (Betz-Bornstein, 2013).

Coulter, like Baudrillard, was endowed with a singular ability to transcend the architectural discourse and understand the latter in its many dimensions, which is evident after perusing his impressive list of publications (thanks to Richard Smith for patiently gathering and generously sharing online Coulter's bibliography.) Including a book review of Barbara Isenberg's *Conversations with Frank Gehry*, an analysis of Louis Kahn's monumentalism and a critique of One World Trade Centre - the skyscraper winner of the competition for Ground Zero - Coulter's works on architecture exceeds a sociological analysis of the discipline and attests to his ability to parallel, if not match, Baudrillard's own sensibility towards architecture. This makes Coulter's intellectual legacy a fascinating project for further investigations.

In only one instance have I found myself question Coulter's views on architecture, and this occurs when, in his review of Isenberg's book (*Conversations with Frank Gehry*), Baudrillard's astonishment at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is interpreted as a form of sheer appreciation, if not praise, of Gehry's poetic and innovative use of Computer Aided Design (or rather non-use of it, as the form-finding was developed analogically). Coulter's conclusion, that "Gehry is leading architecture from the virtual to the actual (singular) object"

(Coulter, 2010), insinuates doubt, as on more than one occasion Bilbao seems to exemplify, in Baudrillard's writing, a process of mutation and combinatorial variations, of cloning and automatic writing, rather than an unexpected inversion of architectural categories and criterions. Other than that, I have found Coulter's comments on architecture most revealing. For example, his definition of New York's Manhattan as a "vast cemetery" of the International Style, a monumental tombstone to the "failed solutions" of architectural modernisms - and at a time when Manhattan is unanimously celebrated as the masterpiece of architecture's heroic phase - is not only perceptive, but indicative of Coulter's ability to locate Baudrillard where we would least expect him (Coulter, 2015). His competence in materializing those missing steps in Baudrillard's work, which Baudrillard himself carefully and skillfully implemented in his writings, proves key in more than one occasion.

Equally significant is Coulter's complementing of Baudrillard's interest in the American desert as indexical of that desert/urban environment binary opposition that informs Baudrillard's travelogue diaries, and especially on the way it manifests itself in Coulter's architectural criticisms of Manhattan regarding the completed project of One World Trade Center by David Child (Skidmore, Owings and Merrill). As an Architect, visual Culturist, Critical Theorist and Baudrillardian scholar myself, it is on this point that I wish to expand.

The winning entry in the 2003 competition to replace the destroyed Twin Towers, which consists of a 546m tall tower of glass as well as a Memorial Square where fountains trace the footprint of the collapsed towers, failed to impress Coulter, who wrote: "'One World' Trade Center is more than an address - it is a commentary on Western globalization from one of its principal nodes" (Coulter, 2014); hence, Coulter's understanding of the building as the perfect emanation of Baudrillard's simulation in its shift to monopoly capitalism:

In a world which was entering into increasing levels of hyper-realism [...] "One World" is the only way capitalism can now view the future - one

world united under westernization [...] As such it makes an adequate symbolic replacement for the Twin Towers (Coulter, 2014).

In stark contrast to One World Trade Centre, for Coulter, is Tadao Ando's proposal for Ground Zero, which he succinctly describes as an architectural 'singularity' consisting of a gentle 'swelling' of the Earth as the result of a small section of a massive yet imaginary subterranean globe calculated as a ratio of the equatorial radius of the Earth. With a base diameter of 200m and a total height of 32m, the mound, which Ando wished to cover in grass, would have been a "tomb for the repose of souls"; here, the desire for one economy is replaced by the desire for one Earth. By avoiding the magniloquent language of modernist Manhattan, the unrealized project denies the terrorists any claim to victory, thus turning architecture into the symbolic space *par excellence*. In the age of terrorism, Coulter argues, multiculturalism would have been celebrated where terrorism had denied it the most (Coulter, 2014).

The proposal is singular, and what strikes me here is Coulter's ability to grasp Baudrillard's concept of doubling. Extrapolated from the splitting of the Twin Towers, it is then seen reflected in its reversed version as Ando's swelling.

On this reading, not only is planet Earth doubled and duplicated into its imaginary counter-version, but so is architecture as it is de-territorialized and translated into a poetic act that holds nothing of the brutality and banality of the realized competition proposal. Baudrillard's 'reversibility', the idea of "sending back to the system its own logic" through a different form of mirroring and duplication, finds here its miraculous actualization and, thanks to the displayed ability to combine metaphysics and minimalism, produces meaning where we would least expect it (Baudrillard, 2007: 180). Through a simple gesture, through the disarticulation of the original form of 'deterrence' that this non-architectural-event represents – that is, through an elementary twist of the archetypes at play (such as the idea of a gentle swelling alluding to an entire planet and, conversely, the other way round) – meaning is restored, and so is the marvel that this (un)surprisingly unrealized project arouses. The most refined

enunciation of what Baudrillard used to imply by “Duchamp in architecture” is finally enucleated.

The key point I want to make here is that in Gerry Coulter we have lost not just the founder of the *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, but first and foremost an original scholar whose ability to interpret and understand Baudrillard reached a point of empathy and consonance unknown to most, one sometimes so close to its source of inspiration as to end up sharing with it the same outcomes, and, presumably, the same limitations. When a scholar is as close to their favorite master as Coulter was to Baudrillard, what one gets is not merely an ‘intellectual doppelganger’, but, as in the case of Plato’s *Cratylus* (whose analogy with Baudrillard’s third order simulation Butler stresses in *Jean Baudrillard: In Defence of the Real*), a fellow-worker, an accomplice, another original and, in this specific case, a ‘partner in crime’ whose intellectual affinity resonates in terms of Baudrillard’s long-term interest in the re-enchantment of life. It is this endeavor, which is Baudrillard’s specific task to provoke and arouse, that I am celebrating in the work of Gerry Coulter.

References

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