

R E V I E W S

Travelling Nowhere

America, by Jean Baudrillard. London, Verso 1988. Reviewed by Jennifer Craik.

Jean Baudrillard went to America. Indeed, he often does - as a French superstar/philosopher/intellectual. And when he wrote of his travels, everyone sat up: what would this eminence grise make of America? He concluded that American culture "is a seismic form ... born of a rift with the Old World, a tactile, fragile, mobile, superficial culture".

But did we need Baudrillard to tell us this? Like Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality*, Baudrillard found a ready market, an audience eager for his impressions. This eagerness was reflected in the physical presentation of the book; the French version, published in 1986, appeared as a paperback without illustrations, while the English version is a 'coffee table' book, with a photographic jacket, glossy paper, spacious layout, and accompanied by black and white photographs.

To Baudrillard, this probably confirms his view of America as crass and superficial, but it also reflects a long tradition of self-doubt and self-criticism that simmers under the glossy surface of American culture. These characteristics mark the difference between the Old and New Worlds more than any other. It is difficult to imagine that a book titled *France* by an eminent American philosopher would have a similar reception.

To give him due credit, Baudrillard has tried hard to come to terms with this America, casting it as the new centre of the world:

"We in Europe possess the art of thinking, of analysing things and reflecting on them. No one disputes our historical subtlety and conceptual imagination. Even the great minds across the Atlantic envy us in this regard. But

the resounding truths, the realities of genuinely great moment today are to be found along the Pacific seaboard or in Manhattan. It has to be said that New York and Los Angeles are at the centre of the world, even if we find the idea somehow both exciting and disenchanting."

It is the American ability to combine overly visible patriotism with self-criticism that baffles the discipline of the 'civilised' citizen. Americans are both obsessed with a nostalgia for points of origin and pathologically insecure about their identity at the same time as being perpetually parodic and reflexive. Their cultural style combines over-statement with an eternal quest for meaning.

Baudrillard characterises French and American cultural mores in terms of different body techniques:

"You have only to see a French family settling in on a Californian beach to feel the abominable weight of our culture. The American group remains open; the French unit immediately creates a closed space. The American child roams far and wide; the French one hovers around its parents. The Americans see to it that they stay well stocked with ice and beer; the French see to it that social niceties are observed, and that they keep up a theatrical show of well-being."

While Americans lack 'aristocratic grace', they have a "freedom of bodily movement that this possession of space" allows which has built a culture which is "vulgar but 'easy'":

"We are a culture of intimacy, which produces manners and affectation; they have a democratic culture of space. We are free in spirit, but they are free in their actions."

But although recognising the difference of American culture, Baudrillard chooses to articulate that difference via the mechanisms of cinematic

realism, the archetypal apparatus of illusion. He equates American culture with cinema in contrast with the theatrical basis of European culture: "Americans experience reality like a tracking shot." Baudrillard interprets America as a succession of realist screen images - a lexicon of iconographical referents at his side - in the same way that European culture is conventionally characterised in theatrical terms. (This also accounts for the very different forms of Hollywood and European cinema.)

Baudrillard chooses the desert as the site which explains America, a curious choice since it must be the most inexplicable place for civilised sensibilities. His description of the desert as "an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance" rather confirms that suspicion. Elsewhere he muses:

"... for us the whole of America is a desert. Culture exists there in a wild state: it sacrifices all intellect, all aesthetics in a process of literal transcription into the real."

Vast, apparently empty, continents pose an extraordinary fascination and threat to European sensibilities. Citizens of the New World are equally obsessed with understanding their physical surroundings, hence the primacy of landscape in art. An English colleague declared with exasperation after a few months in Australia, "I'm sick of hearing about the uniqueness of the Australian landscape and the special quality of the light". She was right, for critiques of Australian art and culture are obsessed with the physical fact of Australia.

Like all New World countries, Australians relentlessly examine what it is that makes it different from the Old World, and this is most clearly demonstrated in the radically different landscape and its implications for ways of seeing and living. We are not Europe; we have not tamed nature; we are not truly civilised.

In short, the New World is composed of a series of Not statements that puts it outside the generic terms of European civilisation. Try as he may, America is outside meaning for Baudrillard. Even the linguistic baggage of post-modernism, that ultimate void of analysis, with terms such as modernity, hyperwhatever, transhistorical, sidereal, cannot pin down America.

The New World continues to be judged by the criteria of the Old World, fails to conform to its standards. A noted British academic on a visit to Australia was somewhat put out by his first taxi ride. The driver had 'entertained' him with various 'bush wisdoms' during the drive. The escalating rage of the passenger came to a head with the driver's colloquial farewell, "See you later". "Not if I can help it", snarled the alighting passenger - a *Not* statement designed to put the driver back in his place, a position from which opinions should not be uttered.

Europeans who have not become the New World - and we should remember that Americans, Australians, and others,

are primarily transplanted Old World peoples - cannot accept the courageous break with origins. Migration to a New country is a *Not* statement of a radical kind; old citizenship is disavowed and a new citizenry created. Some people are 'liberated' by transplantation, others find it an audacious threat. (The great majority find it as humdrum as any other place.)

Baudrillard can only see the surface of that space, mobility and diversity like the twinkling surface of a pond, its mirrored refractions deflecting the gaze of the onlooker.

Mind you, Baudrillard is not alone in struggling to come to terms with the New World. John Mortimer's character

of fiction, Rumpole, found retirement in the paradise of Florida intolerable. Rumpole returned to England declaring that "travel ... narrows the mind extraordinarily".

Here is the central paradox of *America*. It is about a journey as a traveller, but one who remains a tourist. Baudrillard is forever at the point of origin, his parlour, as he hurtles through a succession of *Not* places. Citizens of the New World have to come to terms with life as a series of *Not*s which construct a culture of diversity, contradiction, fluidity and productivity. While some transAtlantic travellers revel in *Not*s, others retreat to the solidity of the *Known*.

Subversive Secretaries

Secretaries Talk. Sexuality, Power and Work, by Rosemary Pringle. Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1989. Reviewed by Gail Reekie.

When women first invaded the male domain of the office in the late nineteenth century, women concerned to raise the status of the business woman advised them to dress modestly, avoid all social intercourse with male colleagues and to restrict their morning greeting to a cordial but dignified bow to all in the room.

One friendly word from an employer could be the road to destruction. Those women who were over-familiar with their bosses risked being labelled a 'pretty typewriter', an attractive and usually working class young woman who used her sexuality and her position to snare a husband (or worse).

Feminists today continue to see sexual behaviour in the office as both inappropriate and potentially harmful to women. Rosemary Pringle suggests, however, that their attempts to keep sex out of the office have been misplaced. She argues that sexuality is not antithetical to the rational and bureaucratic world of modern corporations, as Weber suggested, but is, in fact, essential to its creation. Secretaries and bosses work within 'erotic bureaucracies' in which masculine rationality depends on the existence of

a realm of an Other which includes the feminine, the personal, the emotional, the sexual and the irrational. Rather than see sex as an 'unwelcome invader' of the workplace, it might be better to acknowledge its centrality to the lives of both men and women, and - more importantly - to explore its subversive potential.

Pringle provides convincing evidence, taken from an extensive series of interviews, of the ways in which secretaries extract power, pleasure and satisfaction from the sexual components of their relationships with bosses. Bosses have a variety of ways of exercising power over secretaries, and secretaries may accommodate or resist. Pringle identifies three distinct themes of power and resistance: the master-slave theme in which the boss is subject and the secretary object, the mother/nanny-son theme in which the secretary is the subject and the boss may be positioned as the 'naughty boy', and the 'team' theme which evokes equality and modernity. Any given boss-secretary relationship may reveal one, two or all three discourses simultaneously. Thus Pringle avoids privileging any one discourse: the relationships are, on the contrary, complex, dynamic, dependent on a variety of circumstances, and they exhibit different degrees and different kinds of domination and subordination. *Secretaries Talk* presents secretaries, therefore, not as victims but as agents.

The interview provides the reader with absorbing glimpses into the intensely personal and intimate nature of office relationships. Some of the bosses are engagingly honest in revealing patriarchal attitudes of gothic proportions. My favourite was Tom, who happily recounted that he got his secretary to chop up the onion to go into his tin of salmon at lunchtime, go home and take the washing off the line for him or, if he was feeling particularly generous and wanted to give Carol a break: 'I might say, Carol, duck out to David Jones and buy me a chicken. I don't really want a chicken, I just take it home and put it in the freezer ...'. Carol, however, takes pleasure in performing services for Tom because she perceives it as 'special treatment'. She plays nanny or minder to his naughty boy.

Tom, happily, appears to be unusual. More typical was Richard whose strategies of control operated not out of coercion but out of 'caring' for his secretary (who worked up to eighty hours a week with no paid overtime) and treating her as part of a team. Richard feels he can decide what's 'good' for Stephanie - the clothes she should wear, how long she should take for lunch, her apparent reluctance to take on additional responsibilities - but Stephanie says she wears what she wants and has no interest in the job opportunities that Richard has offered her.

While Richard appears to have the power in their relationship, Stephanie gets the pleasure of being needed, of identifying with the enterprise, of being seen as womanly. She also learns vital

information about the firm through the managing director's secretary that Richard would never have access to, and which enables her to deny as 'trivial' the power that Richard has.

Do the same pleasure principles apply to female bosses and female secretaries, to female bosses and male secretaries, or male bosses and male secretaries? Pringle found extremely few examples of the latter, most male managers saying that they couldn't imagine having a man as a secretary. Women bosses with women secretaries are, however, becoming more common. Pringle argues that authority relations between women bosses and secretaries are organised around mother-daughter relations. Young women often transfer their affections from their own to someone else's mother. Clare (secretary) thinks Susan (boss) is terrific, not because she is like her own mother, but because she is 'very different' from her. There is a strong element of narcissism in other female/female office pairs. Gillian sees her secretary Naomi 'not only as a useful appendage but as a mirror image, a junior version of herself'.

The relationship assumes very different meanings when the secretary is male. One male secretary interviewed was much more willing than his female counterparts to pass judgment on his employer and to talk about sexual fantasies and interactions, implying that these were under his control. Unlike female secretaries, he was conscious of his power, or potential power, as a man. In this case, 'gender quite clearly overrides formal position in determining what can be said'. In examining male-female, female-female, and female-male relationships, Pringle presents a satisfyingly detailed and subtle portrait of the sexual politics of the office.

By paying attention to the operation of sexuality, power and pleasure, Pringle makes a radical departure from more conventional analyses of the labour process. Women's ready acceptance of the secretarial work option is better explained by looking for the sources of control, autonomy and pleasure in boss-secretary relations than by any notion of 'false consciousness'. Pringle draws on discussions of sado-masochism and pornography to explain the benefits to men and women of participating in a master-slave relationship. We cannot always assume that it is the sadist who holds power; neither is there anything

absolute about the gender roles typical of S/M. Female secretaries may 'control the whole situation by determining how much violence (symbolic or otherwise) is permissible and by making her (masochistic) pleasure the centre of attention'.

Pringle's main focus on the nexus between pleasure and power raises important and hitherto unarticulated questions for feminist analyses of the workplace. How, for example, do we define pleasure? Pringle accepts the proposition that both men and women seek pleasure from erotic fantasies made necessary by the decline of religion and community and the consequent burden of rationality. She appears not to distinguish between men's pleasure and women's pleasure, or to question that male bosses and female secretaries might have different experiences and expectations of pleasure as a consequence of their sex. If, as Pringle argues, so-called universal concepts such as 'class' mean something very different for women, might there not also be sexually-specific meanings attached to pleasure? If subjectivity is gendered, then surely pleasure is too.

Pringle identifies and sympathises most easily with feminist secretaries, a minority of women who want to see secretarial work properly valued but are divided on how to achieve this. Pringle provides a clear set of strategies designed to exploit rather than deny the inherently sexual nature of office

relationships. She rejects 'degendering' options that cut feminists off from resistances based on women's difference, and argues instead that 'resistance must be based on the demand that women's gender and sexuality be fully and equally recognised'. Strategies of resistance should not only embrace and seek to transform sexuality, but will be most effective where women derive pleasure from their actions. For example, rather than trying to eliminate 'grooming and deportment' classes from the curricula of secretarial schools, Pringle suggests that they be reformulated to introduce critical ideas about gender relations, heterosexuality, fashion and beauty.

If we acknowledge that "sexuality cannot be 'banished' from the office", we may be in a position to challenge its meanings and hence its power. Pringle speculates on the possibilities of a postmodern feminism which suggests that parody, play and diversity have something to offer a broader politics of change. This is a vastly different politics from that articulated by the promoters of office work as an avenue of female employment in the years of first-wave feminism. In an exciting, provocative and intellectually creative study, Pringle immeasurably advances our understanding of 'secretaries' and finds a theoretical way out of the labour process trap.

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Arguing for Auntie

Breaking Up the ABC, by Glyn Davis. Allen & Unwin, 1989. Reviewed by Andrew Funston.

Glyn Davis' book has a clever cover design. That familiar ABC logo is coming apart. What's more, the unravelling logo is red hot on top graduating to dusky purple on the bottom. A sunset on the ABC? A sunrise for a new order of national broadcasting? The cover blurb promises both.

Breaking Up the ABC is a significant addition to the small number of detailed written discussions about the ABC. Mixing plenty of insiders' critiques of the national broadcaster with attempts to take the long view, Davis doggedly pursues his case that the ABC is fundamentally flawed in its current organisation. Davis is ardent about the need for Australia to have viable public broadcasting: "For a democracy the right to broadcast public interpretations of events is too important to be left solely the preserve of media magnates." But he is particularly sceptical about ABC independence given the funding relationship with parliament. He mistrusts the assumption that the ABC can work in the 'public interest' rather than that of parliament.

So how would Davis like to see the ABC pieces rearranged for the good of public broadcasting? He offers several strategies, including:

... Cabinet could deconstruct the ABC, break it into constituent functional parts so that each could cater for a different public. Some, but not all, of these services may become commercial to offset costs. Others must retain state support. This new disaggregated ABC might be successful where a diffuse, multi-functional bureaucracy has proved expensive and of limited effectiveness ... If the new broadcasters which result from deconstructing the ABC had multiple sources of funding and different boards of control, then the ideal of public service broadcasting - diverse viewpoints, services and experiences - would be realised.

There are, of course, things here that will sound alarm bells to many readers. These lines don't convey the resistance that would be bound to meet even limited or targeted privatisation of any of the ABC's key functions. Elsewhere in the text, Davis does acknowledge the problematic nature of many of his prescriptions, but quite often a particular idea seems to rely on a blunt and assertive discourse that masks the complexity of the things it is describing. Offset costs, disaggregated, multi-functional ... Other readers will probably also ask what measures Davis is using when he describes the ABC bureaucracy as having proved expensive and of limited effectiveness. What, compared with the Defence bureaucracy? Or the Australian Bicentennial Authority?

Davis goes on to describe such specific changes as the development of a separate news service or agency, possibly in competition with AAP, to gather and relay news for public sector broadcasters and sales overseas. Davis argues that the ABC should not both produce and transmit programs: "only then could it avoid the inefficiencies which have plagued the ABC in co-ordinating production and administration". The ABC should purchase locally produced programs and provide air time, on an ABC television network along the model of American public broadcasting stations, to independent film makers, individuals and the emerging non-profit public television co-operatives. SBS, which Davis suggests is beset by the same problems inherent in the ABC, would be reconstructed on British Channel 4 lines; with a public interest orientation and corporate sponsorship.

Davis outlines his argument for these changes in a chapter called 'Hard Times'. He argues that worthwhile reforms to internal shortcomings begun by the Dix Committee (the 1981 Report of the Committee of Review of the Australian Broadcasting Commission) have been regularly disrupted. The ABC's failed attempt in 1985 to remedy its problems with changes to program-

ming, to "expand its constituency to maintain political support" put the organisation more firmly in the sights of the 'economic rationalists'. But, for Davis, the ABC's problems are much bigger than internal shortcomings, or years of disrupted reforms: "Parliament created an ABC that must embrace a range of unrelated activities ... The result is a rambling incoherent structure with diffuse, vague organisational objectives. The corporation is required, by legislation, to produce a comprehensive service for an elusive audience. It must compete on unequal terms with affluent commercial radio and television stations geared to mass appeal programming."

Maybe you followed the fiery debates surrounding the federal government's review of national broadcasting policy last year. All sorts of people jumped up to share the stage; to protest at the attacks on the ABC's liberty by Gareth Evans, then Minister for Transport and Communications.

David Hill, the ABC's managing director, showed his muscle and steered the campaign. The ABC would keep its current charter, would get its funding agreements, would keep the orchestras, the religious shows and sports business. And the ABC was not about to go tacky with corporate sponsorship (recently confirmed by the current minister). The ABC would be saved.

But for some commentators the outcome wasn't very surprising: the ABC successfully mobilised its very considerable base of support. The ratings for ABC programs simply don't reflect the reality of that base; nor the degree to which people will fight to make sure that the ABC's best programs are kept alive.

I suspect that *Breaking Up the ABC* might have offered slightly different prescriptions if the book had been written after the ABC victory over the recommendations and orientation of the National Review of Broadcasting.

It is hard to imagine that the ABC will be 'deconstructed' in the near future. And in an age of privatisation, the best of the ABC is probably safest in with Aunty. But Davis has provided people interested in the future of public broadcasting with some territory for debate; especially debate about the need for greater public participation to make the ABC less of a thought-piece and entertainer for elites.