

over, the genetic code may be theorized as an objective model in a phantasy of a unified semiotic field. Baudrillard thinks that this code is a reproduction machine: it is the model of models, a single irreducible metaphysical principle which provides a perfect example of operational simulation. Kellner does not overlook the obvious analogies of such an example between DNA, linguistics and social organization. These analogies, however, serve Baudrillard's purpose because they express the tyranny of the code, by which he means the system which underlies every message. In Sebeok's use of genetics, every message is coded many times over by numerous sub-codes, all of which are reducible to the code, the model of models.

Kellner is uneasy with the idea of the code and expresses concern that "one must avoid the semiotic mistake of projecting the idea of 'inscription' onto the world of nature." This is especially the case for the genetic code since, for Guattari, it functions asemiotically (it is linguistically unformed).

The code in its most general and flexible terms is a system of rules for the combination of stable sets of terms into messages (*langue* is to code as *parole* is to message; whenever there is signification, there is a code). By "the system" Baudrillard means "the code," and the logic of the code is disjunctive. In these terms, as a generalizable structural principle, the code can accommodate a range of contents. In order to see why this is the case one must first understand what makes an analysis structural. That is, a given content is brought to light in virtue of a model, a structure consisting of a formal set of elements and relations.

By reading Sebeok against himself, Baudrillard finds evidence of what Kellner seems to think is some form of fetishism on Baudrillard's part. Kellner, then, denies Baudrillard any critical distance from his examples. At the same time, and this is what makes Kellner's effort so frustrating, he has not missed the fact that the structural revolution remains for Baudrillard a repressive, reductive and reifying institution against which he sets his concept of the symbolic. This revolution neutralizes poetics, excludes ambivalence, polices anagrams and, in general, divides and conquers by means of *la barre saussurienne*, the bar of structural implication between the signifier and the signified. Baudrillard has consistently argued against "semiological dandyism," even though Kellner insists on pinning this label on him. Substantial sections of *Lechange symbolique* and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* are devoted to attacks on the disjunctive code whose structural effects are produced by the separation of terms in a form of mutual exclusion in which each term in its turn becomes the imaginary of the other.

There is also the matter of Kellner's charge of sign-fetishism. Baudrillard too has called for a critique of the signifier-fetishism of the sign-form that "Marxist

analysis has not yet mastered." He complains of both Saussure's and Emile Benveniste's idealism, of the metaphysics which drives semio-linguistics, and of the fictional separation and subsequent bridging of this so-called "gap" between the sign and the referent. Marx, that is, Harpo, thinks Baudrillard in *Lechange symbolique*, knew better than to create a gap in-between the sign and the referent only in order to fill it with the problematics of motivation: "...when Harpo Marx brandished a real sturgeon in the place of the word 'sturgeon,' here, then, in substituting the referent for the term, in abolishing their separation, he truly destroys arbitrariness and at the same time the system of representation — a poetic act *par excellence*: killing the signifier 'sturgeon' with its own referent." Baudrillard's point is that in everyday life, even linguists like Benveniste have no need of the baggage of semio-linguistics.

In short, Kellner's *Baudrillard* does not initiate us into the bar games of post-structuralism. Baudrillard's critique of the structure of the sign and of signification as fundamentally simulacral was part of a collection of practices which I call bar games — the bar in question is the one in-between the signifier and the signified and, really, any bar of difference. Bar games were standard features of the anti-semiological routine of post-structuralist critical practices in the face of the institution of interpretation called structuralism. Just as Derrida had his hinge, Lyotard his band and whirling bar, Deleuze and Guattari their weak disjunction, Baudrillard had his bars of structural implication and radical exclusion. The former may be found in his table of conversions between political economy and semiology; the latter separated the fields of value from non-value (everything that is structural as opposed to symbolic). One may be said to be a post-structuralist if one plays anti-semiological bar games. Lacan too made the bar an issue since he was, in spite of his claims of scientificity, an important player of anti-Saussurean bar games. The period from 1966 to 1976 in Paris was a time of intense play and hanging around the bar. Now, it's not that Kellner refuses to play, but rather that he hasn't noticed the games.

As the curtain begins to fall on the Baudrillard "scene," we will have time to read his work in semiotic terms, and on this basis mount a new production. In this respect, Kellner's *Baudrillard* may serve as a negative example, although as any player of bar games knows, a negative such as "-" may become, with a well-placed stroke, a "+" or a "=", bringing into play Lacan's stroking of the horizontal bar, or Pierre Klossowski's maniac of the parallel bars. I'm game, bar none. ♦

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LORENZO BUJ

The Secret Impulse

**Lipstick Traces:
A Secret History of the
20th Century**
by Greil Marcus

Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989, 496 pp.

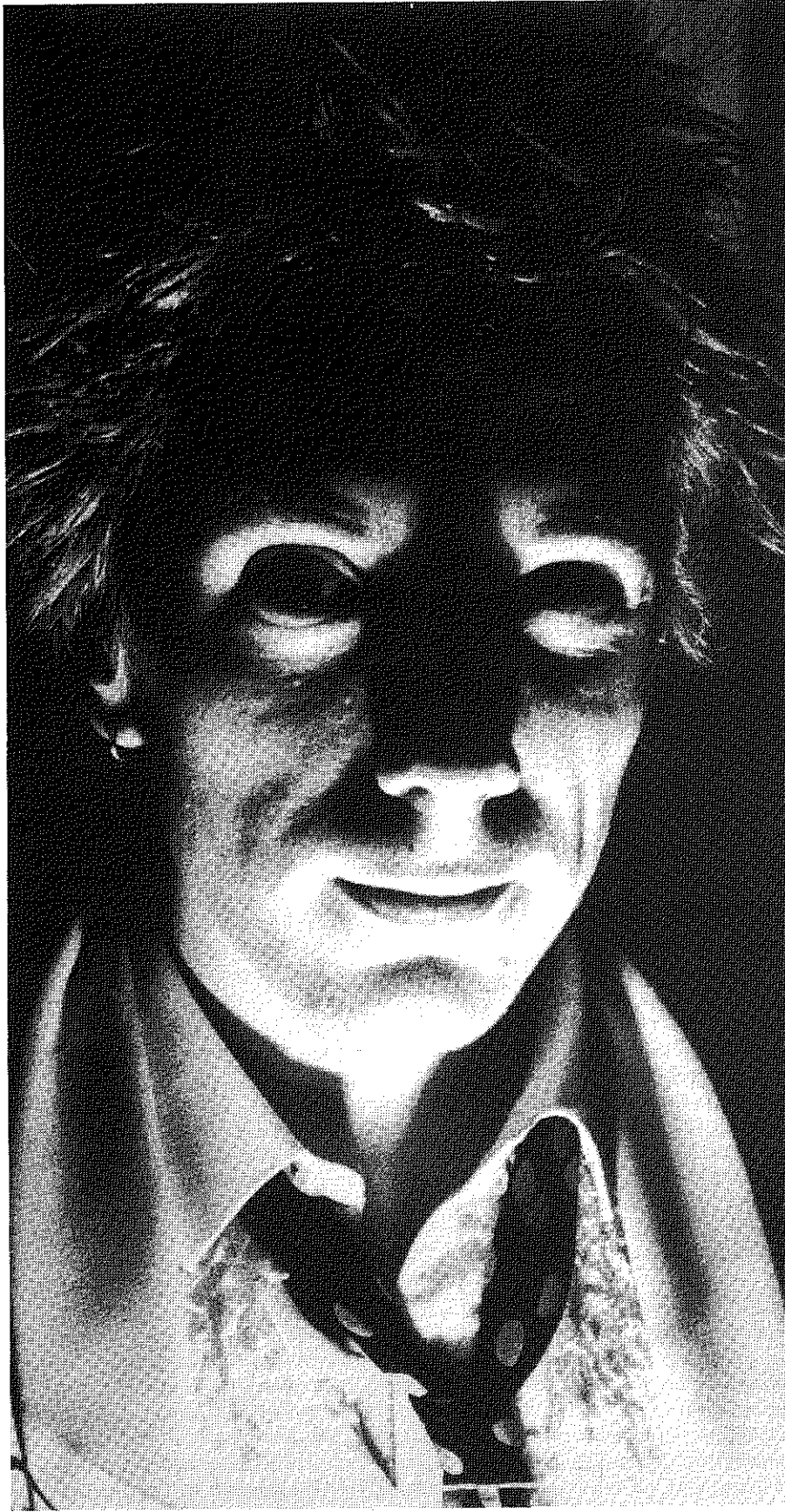


At age 45 Greil Marcus maintains that "any good punk song can sound like the greatest thing you've ever heard." The line comes from *Lipstick Traces*, a vast amplification of the themes that have obsessed him in the 80s, and a book that actually exceeds his noteworthy achievement in *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock and Roll* (1975).

Lipstick Traces is a recursive meditation on "the spirit of negation," an aberrant trans-historical force that has fueled orgies of social protest and political disgust, or, more likely, propelled avant-gardes, secret societies, restive anarchists and petty thugs with a theological axe to grind. Marcus is drawn to those moments in a cabaret, a cathedral, a lecture hall, when an individual or a small group makes an absolute gesture, carries out an act of transgression, that promises to wipe out or radically reconfigure all social facts.

The last Sex Pistols gig at San Francisco's Winterland Ballroom is at the autobiographical core of the book, for that's when Marcus heard Johnny Rotten's voice bring all "the unpaid debts of history" back into play. Reflecting on that night in January 1978, the text reaches for an uplifting malevolence and swells into hyperbole, but when the narrative cuts off we assume that the intellectual aftershock must have been equally empowering, leaving Marcus with a burden and a premise for a book: in annihilating history, in denying all personality but his own, Rotten may have evaded the debilities of influence anxiety, but he was nevertheless carrying on a long-standing "conversation," one he may not have consciously understood or even been aware of.

This conversation, whose ageless documents are reduced to shattered pieces and refracted particles, is made up of bizarre congruities and stray echoes sounding



each other out across space and time. Marcus uses the Pistols as a radioactive fragment in a great code that includes the Paris Commune, the Situationists, Michael Jackson's "Victory" tour, gnostic heretics, Dadaist blasphemers, etc. The diversity of such material is pulled together by a deliberate strategy of repetition and iterative explication. The method is non-systematic but relentless, resulting in a lengthy work that nevertheless disclaims the possibility of its own totality. It sometimes feels as if the intellectual content simply crystallized around memories and fantasies, and things Marcus had been clipping and collecting over the years: newspaper scraps, notes from abandoned projects, excerpts of outdated essays, snatches of music and bits of poetry. The author himself thereby enters into the conversation, carried forth by a visionary itch that underwrites the residue of confessional longing evident everywhere in his text.

Scholars or ideologically committed readers might complain this kind of approach can hardly be to the author's credit, but such are the perils of a book whose repressed aim is to confess an attraction to the apocalyptic transports that form the secret impulse of all "revolutions." It's all there in the long opening chapter on the Pistols, which shows that when it wasn't stupid, petty and fascistic, punk was a promise that the wild and beautiful violence of life was vibrating at the precipice of everyday armageddon. But between the promise and its implied demands (demands fanning out from the music, then reformed and fired back by its adherents), the self-cancelling ideals of

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punk were always being sucked back into the aesthetic vortex that was one condition of their actualization. And the searing rage, likewise, forced itself into a hopeless *ménage* with the existential ugliness which punk felt it was privileged to exploit.

Of course, the same can be said of Dada, thus making the book an activist's nightmare, a troublesome tale of movements and gestures that could not accommodate themselves to any lasting form of political efficacy. If the Situationists, the most theoretically sophisticated of the lot, eventually formed a cultus "armed with the dispensations of poetry," then the stakes — as Marcus tells it — are invariably metaphysical, even when the gamblers are clear-sighted Marxists defying the odds in a vast, postwar videodrome of consumer capitalism. Rather than being revolutionary and reconstructive, the language of paradox and negation is, it seems, provocative and dissipative, like the social energies it unleashes. In piecing together the secret history, or in unknowingly reassuming a titanic and essentially private responsibility for its debts, the "revolutionary," like the liberal critic, comes upon "a map made altogether of dead ends, where the only movement possible [is] not progress, not construction, but ricochet and surprise."

Here Marcus sounds uncannily like a West-coast heir of Emerson. Even more so when he claims that Jonathan Richman's "Road Runner" shows that "the power of rock 'n' roll was all in its leaps from one moment to the next, in the impossibility of its transitions." I am awed by this simple revelation, perhaps because of its analogue in Emerson's *Self-Reliance*: "Power ceases in the moment of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim."

There are many images in Marcus of compressed intensities, microcharged synaptic leaps, risks hurled across the void and originating beneath all thresholds of consciousness — images that deny the wicked pieties of the past, the fatalism of the future, and the paralyzing reifications of life in the capitalist present. Therefore, if ultimately too slight, too romantic in its political commitments, the book keeps reminding you that its operative word is "secret," and it begs for a patient anagogic response — a corollary to the probing, mature anguish that compels a middle-aged man to come to terms with the teenage *revenant* in his psyche. ♦

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an interview with Greil Marcus



Lorenzo Buj: For me the most remarkable fact about this book is not its great range, but how utterly personal it is, how much you confess without actually sounding confessional.

Greil Marcus: I thought a lot about whether to write the book that way, with that kind of voice, but it seemed to me that after 20 years of writing about music and other things, that I had the right to write as a public person, to step out, not because whatever I had done, or seen, or thought, had more validity than whatever anyone else had done, but because it would be dishonest for me to pretend I've written this book as some sort of disinterested, historicist study, which it isn't. I don't write to explain. I write to make things happen. I overdramatize, but I'd much rather overdramatize than overexplain. The fact is we have all been socialized, and educated, and brainwashed to think that the kind of culture we live in our everyday lives, and most care about, is worthless, empty, and merely amusement, and if we actually were truly moral people we wouldn't waste our time with it. I'm trying to make the case in a dramatic way that that's totally false.

You didn't write very much about punk in America.

No, not really. I wrote about God and the State. I think the only American punk band I would have written about would be X. Just given their first album, which I think is as extreme as anything that came out of England, and as shapely, and as convincing and as upsetting. But this is not a book about punk, and this is not a history of Dada, this is not a treatise on the Situationists. It's a book about a voice, about a movement through time of a certain impulse, and how that impulse catches up various

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