
I. BOOK REVIEWS

Vanessa Freerks, *Baudrillard with Nietzsche and Heidegger: Towards a Genealogical Analysis*, Studies in Historical Philosophy, Vol. 4, Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2021, 222 pp., €35, ISBN: 9783838214740

Douglas Kellner (UCLA)

In her highly original and provocative *Baudrillard with Nietzsche and Heidegger: Towards a Genealogical Analysis*, Vanessa Freerks provides the most illuminating and in-depth analysis that I have read of the relation between these three thinkers. She begins with a close analysis of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* and shows "how certain critical elements, strategies and figures within Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* are mobilized in Baudrillard's work."¹ Freerks engages Baudrillard's genealogy of the consumer society, and demonstrates how both thinkers deploy a genealogical method and analyze power structures in this society, alongside the values and discourses involved in its production and consumption.

Freerks shows how Baudrillard and Nietzsche can be used to study key configurations of contemporary consumer and capitalist society, as well as its discourses and moralities. In taking up Baudrillard's genealogy of the orders of simulacra, she explores its relation to Nietzsche's "reversal of Platonism."² Whereas for Plato the forms of Beauty, the Good, and Justice reside in an ideal world, in Nietzsche, morality and value are grounded in historical contexts and processes like "Master/Slave" relations. Nietzsche's famous "transvaluation of values" consists in revealing the values presented as the highest as in fact "slave

¹ Vanessa Freerks, *Baudrillard with Nietzsche and Heidegger: Towards a Genealogical Analysis* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2021), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 97.

values.” Nietzsche sees their elevation into a higher moral realm by Christianity and idealism as a way to subjugate the higher values of the strong. Thus, the consumer follows “slave values” in his or her consumption, and is a slave to the commodities, spectacles and other forms of consumer society.

Freerks situates both Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* and Baudrillard’s critique of the morality of consumption within late modern society. Especially interesting is her exploration of the way that Nietzsche’s “ascetic priest” transforms into the modern advertiser in Baudrillard, and her analysis of whether the “ascetic ideal” lives on in consumer society despite the “end of transcendence”³. A significant difference, however, lies in Baudrillard’s application of Saussurean linguistics to dissect symptoms of the powers and forces that have made consumer society so characteristic of the advanced form of capitalism in contemporary Western societies. In particular, Freerks shows how Baudrillard uses Saussurean linguistics to dissect the consumer “morality” of advanced capitalist societies. However, as is well known, Baudrillard quickly leaves behind the focus on late-modern consumer society and analyzes instead the emergent postmodern society marked by an explosion of media, an implosion of meaning, and the hyperreal sphere of cyberspace: a society of simulations.

Freerks’ most original move emerges later in her engagement with Baudrillard’s genealogy of death and its “(problematic) relation to Heidegger.”⁴ Indeed, both Baudrillard and Heidegger seek to bring attention to the importance of death, which has become repressed in contemporary consumer societies, for our personal existential situation. Heidegger claims that societal forces (i.e. *das Man*) suppress our awareness of death and finitude and that this covers up their importance in delimiting our existence and revealing the importance of decisive choices for living authentic lives in the face of these.

Baudrillard too engages the repression of death in everyday life using, again, a Nietzschean genealogy of the “extradition” of the dead from the center of the social sphere. He claims that we currently live in a death-denying society, thus occluding the meaning of our own impend-

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

ing deaths, as well as the deaths of others. However, unlike Heidegger, Baudrillard's "genealogical" critique of the exclusion of death in modern societies proposes an alternative social role for death in the form of "primitive symbolic exchange."⁵ This brings death into the social sphere as opposed to the individual sphere, where Heidegger's "authentic" individual, faced with their own death, creates an authentic self by choosing their own life-defining values and morality outside of the sphere of social conformity and ritual.

Freerks engages Baudrillard's genealogy of death as articulated in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* in terms of his own relation to Heidegger, which, as we shall see, further underlines Baudrillard's closeness to Nietzsche. Following other scholars, Freerks argues that Heidegger's concept of my unique death (*Jemeinigkeit*) separates my death from others and gives us no sense of social solidarity with, or concern for, the death of others. Baudrillard also argues that contemporary societies separate the dead from the living by burying them in out-of-the-way cemeteries or through cremation.

Building on his concept of "primitive symbolic exchange," Baudrillard recommends a social relation to death, one opposed to the current repression and denial of death. Rather than postulate an absolute separation between life and death, seeing death as a biological event that ends life, Baudrillard recommends seeing them as intimately intertwined and a part of our everyday lives. Such an expression can be found in the anthropological studies of Marcel Mauss and Marshall Sahlins, who describe how primitive societies engage in rituals and festivities that celebrate death and the dead as part of life. Rituals like those practiced on the Mexican Day of the Dead treat death as a part of life through sacrifices and ritual offerings that render the dead and death part of everyday life. Freerks cites Baudrillard himself: "With the primitives, there is no 'natural' death: every death is social, public, collective, and it is always the effect of an adversarial *will* that the group must absorb (no biology)."⁶

Freerks cites examples from Baudrillard on "death in primitive society as acting as an active opponent with whom one must communicate and negotiate,"⁷ referring, for example, to the initiation rituals in the Cen-

⁵ Ibid., 169.

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, (London: Sage, 1993), 164.

⁷ Ibid., 169.

tral African tribe of Sara, to whom the ethnologist Robert Jaulin dedicated a study in *La Mort Sara*.⁸ Freerks draws attention to the fact that, once again, Baudrillard uses genealogy to force us to change our attitudes toward existential features, such as the dichotomy between life and death. He forces us to rethink our fundamental attitudes to life and death and to come up with our own solutions to life's fundamental problems.

In conclusion, Freerks demonstrates Baudrillard's productive use of Nietzsche's concept of genealogy and the proximity between aspects of their thought. For Freerks, Baudrillard's proposal to rethink the relation between life and death is a radical act that takes away society's power to define and control death. As something embedded in social power and control, death is revealed as something that should be contested, with Freerks therefore providing a more radical reading of Baudrillard than many other studies in the now growing literature on Baudrillard. While one may not agree with all the details of Freerks' close reading of the connection between Nietzsche and Baudrillard, or her specific interpretations, in all cases she presents an original and provocative rethinking of Baudrillard that shows his continued relevance in the contemporary moment. Hence, she has contributed a valuable study to a Baudrillardian corpus that continues to stimulate critical thinking and radical practice.

⁸ Ibid., 170.