

Going Rogue with Baudrillard: A Radical Re-Assessment of War Literature

Florian Andrei Vlad

Abstract:

Konstanze Kutzbach's *OurSelves at War* takes up the task of formulating a post-critical theoretical framework for analysing the borderline negotiations of identity, and the gendered body in particular, in Anglophone war literature from 1898 to the end of the 20th century. Treating war as a "volatile and productive metaphorical site" (p. 3) rather than violent military confrontation in an empirical frame of reference, Kutzbach traces what she argues is a paradigm shift from a focus on representation in war literature, where war and the gendered body entail a more or less straightforward political and ideological metaphoricity (prior to the 1960s), to problematisations of "representability rather than representations of borderline experience of the subject imposed through war and death" (p. 151). Conversely, this paradigm shift overlaps with another one, from the juxtaposition of hero and enemy as subject and object/other, to an increased ambiguity between identity and alterity: "the development from literature whose protagonists tend to locate the perceived threat outside their own self to works which conceive of the source of this threat as originating in the self rather than an external force" (p. 7).

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As literary scholar Konstanze Kutzbach (currently teaching at the University of Cologne) acknowledges in the introduction to her doctoral dissertation *OurSelves at War: Metaphorizations of Identity on the Borderline in Twentieth-Century Anglophone Literature*, one major challenge in tackling 'war literature' is simply defining the term. The term does not indicate a clearly-defined genre, covering instead a broad variety of genres and subgenres. Anglophone war literature throughout the 20th century involves an immense amount of literary work, and Kutzbach addresses this challenge by using as a criterion for her selection of primary sources the metaphoricality of war in relation to the negotiation of identity. However, her declared diachronic framework is made problematic by her staunchly anti-materialist and anti-historicist theoretical approach, since the paradigm shift she discusses is placed outside historical- or genre- specificity. In addition, the reader is left wondering whether this paradigm shift occurs across the board, throughout all war-themed literature, or whether it is a statement that needs to be qualified (since, after all, there are genres of war writing that continue to rely on very traditional formulas).

The theoretical framework of the book uses Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* as a backbone (or as a grid, as the author phrases it, since, she argues, Baudrillard's theories aren't coherent enough to be able to function as a theoretical framework on their own) and fuses them with theoretical concepts from Kristeva, Bataille, Lacan, Foucault, and Deleuze. The 62-page introduction to the theories that inform the infrastructure of the book makes for a stimulating and inspiring read (especially for a theory enthusiast such as myself). The interpretation of Virilio's *Ground Zero* is particularly interesting and unconventional, presenting a reading of "philosophical meta-discourse regarding postmodern war" (p. 16), instead of the more straightforward political commentary that *Ground Zero* is usually made out to be.

Kutzbach makes a truly radical argument when distinguishing between 'political' and 'philosophical' approaches to war literature. Going with the Marxist adage that the point of philosophy is not merely to interpret the world, but to change it, one could certainly argue that philosophical practice is inherently political. Even the 'anti-realist' trend in analytic philosophy (which is referenced in the book) can be interpreted as being indirectly political (if one were to follow the arguments of, for example, Christopher Norris). Even the post-structuralist tradition in

which *OurSelves at War* is positioned has not been entirely free of politics, if one has in mind the politically committed, post-structuralist strains in cultural studies (Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe being prime examples) or in American Studies (if one thinks of the work of, for instance, Donald Pease or Gerald Vizenor).

From a materialist standpoint, discussing war literature while eschewing historicity, contextualisation, and political implications (which Kutzbach rejects as mimetism) is problematic. The empirical reality of how war itself and its socio-cultural impact evolves is, arguably, bound to have some bearing on the representations (and representability) of war, and on the metaphoricality of war. Even contemporary military terms mentioned in the introduction, such as “cyberwar”, “infowar”, and “netwar” (popularised by David Ronfeldt and John Arquilla, but also present in the work of Manuel DeLanda, or Hardt and Negri), are best put into a broader historical perspective (Ronfeldt and Arquilla for instance, trace cyberwar and infowar as far back as the military tactics and strategies of Genghis Khan). Kutzbach opts for a radically different approach, focusing instead on the “self-referential philosophical metaphoricality” of war (a concept repeatedly emphasised throughout the book) within a semiotic/post-structuralist framework that nods to anti-realist philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

OurSelves at War is an original and lively contribution to the field of literary criticism on war fiction, and is of particular interest to students and scholars of post-structuralism, semiotics, and gender studies. Its creative and innovative approach to the theories of Baudrillard and Virilio provides room for argument and new interpretations. It clashes head-on with some basic theoretical and methodological assumptions in cultural studies, and in critical and materialist traditions in the humanities, in general, which makes it an exciting and stimulating read to engage with (regardless of one’s theoretical positioning).