IN NOVEMBER OF 1975, the “Schizo-Culture” conference on madness and prisons, organized by Sylvère Lotringer, and held at Columbia University in New York, saw French Theory coming to America alongside an American avant-garde which, like French Theory, did not conceive itself unified under a title, or as a group. I use the term “French Theory” here somewhat ironically, like François Cusset’s anglicized title for a book that is otherwise written in French: “French Theory” is always a term that I use in quotation marks. An American invention. At the “Schizo-Culture” conference, American writers such as William S. Burroughs, Kathy Acker, Richard Foreman, John Giorno, and John Cage spoke alongside French theorists like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Jean-François Lyotard, marking a significant moment of exchange between intellectual milieus that had already devoted their thought to the perpetual collapsing of borders. Lotringer, who founded the journal Semiotext(e) in 1974, notes that his organization of this conference marked a turning point for him; while the journal had up until that point been devoted to introducing French theorists to an academic American readership, it was Lotringer’s “first attempt to launch a bridge between French theorists and American artists”¹. The journal followed the conference’s lead, publishing French theory alongside American fiction, using a creative layout that juxtaposed the pieces as explicitly as was possible: the pieces were often written in columns that ran alongside one another, and random images were spliced in throughout.

So-called “French Theory” famously touched down on American soil at the 1966 Johns Hopkins “International Colloquium on Critical

Languages and the Sciences of Man,” a conference which was monumentalized by the publication of its proceedings in *The Structuralist Controversy* in 1972, officially establishing the arrival of Jacques Derrida, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, and Roland Barthes in America. If the French writers who spoke at the Johns Hopkins conference marked, for its American audience, the simultaneous arrival of “Structuralism” and its “Deconstruction,” the theorists that Lotringer championed represented the so-called “French-Nietzschean” line. Furthermore, while the 1966 conference was restricted to academics, the Schizo-Culture conference not only bridged French theory and American writing, it also opened its gates to New York’s countercultures, attracting international media attention and an audience of more than 2000 spectators. The two days were volatile, seeing Michel Foucault and R. D. Laing’s presentations interrupted with accusations that they were agents for the CIA, and demands for refunds (in spite of the fact that the conference was unaffiliated with Columbia, and therefore unfunded, and not for profit) when it was suggested by Félix Guattari that the lecture format be replaced by short summaries and followed by discussions. Although the conference was a momentous event in the history of French theory and American literature, it is only ever mentioned in passing, it remains extremely difficult to locate information on this event, and there has not been any academic inquiry into the proceedings of the conference.

François Dosse suggests that we take note not only of the “children of 1968,” but also “the children of 1966,” a year that marked not only the arrival of French theory on the Western side of the Atlantic, but also the publication of Michel Foucault’s *Les Mots et les choses*, Louis Althusser’s *Lire le Capital*, and Emile Benveniste’s *Problème de Linguistique Générale*. We might also want to add 1975 to this list, where the Schizo-
Culture conference, beyond marking the meeting of French theorists and American writers, also saw Michel Foucault, for the first time, reading an early draft of *La Volonté de Savoir* (“Infantile Sexuality”), Gilles Deleuze drawing rhizomes on a chalkboard, working through ideas that would be fleshed out in the infamous “Rhizomes” chapter that opens *Mille Plateaux*, and Félix Guattari speaking about the way that his work with Deleuze was shifting away from its focus on psychoanalysis, and towards a more rigorous analysis of “semiotization,” theorizing the way that all speech production is organized according to the coordinates of a dominant language. William S. Burroughs and John Cage would receive several mentions in *Mille Plateaux*, and, as Deleuze notes, Foucault had a great admiration for Burroughs, and the shift from “disciplinary society” to the “society of control” in Foucault’s writing is an epistemological shift which he derived from Burroughs.

Besides a few obscurely placed interviews and the occasional essay by Lotringer, the most substantial inquiry into this encounter comes from French soil in the form of five pages in François Cusset’s book, with the ironically anglicized title mentioned above, *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutation de la vie intellectuelle aux États-Unis*. In the face of difficulty in locating more substantial ties between the two groups, Cusset, in passing, gives a compelling bit of advice: “On peut toujours imaginer les rencontres qui auraient pu s’y produire entre Foucault, Lyotard, ou Deleuze et les Américains présents.” In fact, I would hasten to argue that this was always the point. This is precisely the value of the absence of metacommentary along the border that stretches between, and marks the collision of, these writers. While Lacan would circumscribe this space of overlap, where metacommentary is lacking, in order to posit the objet petit a, a space which we will feverishly try to fill in order to satiate our desire for metacommentary, Lotringer notes that Semiotext(e) “never attempted to belong anywhere […] the idea was always to find a way out, but it doesn’t exist before you create it, so we kept burning our own traces, abruptly jumping in different directions, losing at every step the readership we had just created among young people.”

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academics, radicals and artists\textsuperscript{9}. Rather than being circumscribable and explicable, and rather than desiring for an explication of this troubling border once and for all, it is the multiplicity of directions in which Semiotext(e) ran, its burning of traces, and its refusal to belong, that turns its history – this border – into so many interesting intensities.

What is “Schizo-Culture?” How does it complement Deleuze and Guattari’s schizopolitics and Michel Foucault’s discursive formations, modes of analysis which argue that power is diffuse rather than institutionally bound? Similarly, how is it appropriate to William S. Burroughs’s cut-ups, the cutting up and folding together of various pieces and genres of writing with his own, or Kathy Acker’s plagiarism, the incorporation of plagiarized paragraphs and identities into her own writing? What can we learn about French poststructuralism, American Postmodernism, and the contemporary landscape in general, through the convergence that Lotringer orchestrated? The project that I am currently in the process of developing is provisionally divided into three sections that inquire into Semiotext(e)’s strategic collation of texts: conversational theory, madness and prisons, and terrorist politics, each of which sees a playing upon, or wholesale eradication of, the borderlines that would contain and separate various sets of discourses. For the remainder of my space, I’ll briefly introduce each of these sections in turn.

**CONVERSATIONAL THEORY**

In the introduction to *Hatred of Capitalism*, Sylvère Lotringer notes that he conducted a lot of interviews throughout the Semiotext(e) project because he wanted theory to “have a direct impact... [to] be grasped as naturally as you breathe”\textsuperscript{10} (16). When wife and collaborator Chris Kraus goes on to call his approach “conversational theory,” he agrees with the term, adding that, beyond the interviews, pieces were put into conversation by surrounding them with other things until they “became part of something more fluid and couldn’t be isolated. Documents, images, quotes, ideas being part of some kind of movement that takes you from one thing to the next, and changes

\textsuperscript{9} “After the Avant-Garde.”

\textsuperscript{10} “Introduction: The History of Semiotext(e),” *Hatred of Capitalism, a Reader*, Kraus Chris and Lotringer Sylvère (eds.). New York: Semiotext(e), 2001, 16.
everything about the world”\textsuperscript{11}. While other contemporary French theorists were infiltrating America via conventional channels like academic conferences and University Presses, Semiotext(e), Schwartz and Balsamo point out, “was conceived as an intervention into cultural politics, not merely as an exercise in theoretical reproduction, and far less an attempt to establish academic legitimacy for some sort of below-the-horizon publishing venture”\textsuperscript{12}. Lotringer is adamant about the fact that, even though the Schizo-Culture conference was held at Columbia, Semiotext(e) never received any funding or support from the university. Fascinated by the way that the New York art scene resonated with the theories which he had been experiencing as a student of Roland Barthes in the late 1960s in France, Lotringer documented the resonance, noting that “schizo-culture” was “the reality of contemporary society” as experienced in the “strange cultural laboratory that New York was at the time”\textsuperscript{13}. Rather than being about the specificity of the discourse of any one of the writers who were invited to his conference, “it had more to do with a multiplicity of flows escaping in all directions and making no sense whatsoever, a cosmic madhouse rather than a stern panopticon”\textsuperscript{14}. Lotringer’s approach to the introduction of French theory to an American audience was decidedly different from its introduction via other channels. As Sande Cohen notes, journals such as \textit{October} and \textit{Critical Inquiry} coloured French theory with their own agendas, the former with its privileging of “historicist psychologization,” and the latter with the “enlightenment” ideologies of progress\textsuperscript{15}. In light of such politics, Cohen asks: “wasn’t Nietzsche/French theory the conceptualization of nonpsychological becomings?”\textsuperscript{16}. How did the Semiotext(e) project provide a different inroads for French theory in America? Was the “conversational” method more appropriate to the subject matter? If Lotringer’s project was “conceived as an intervention into cultural

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} “After the Avant-Garde.”
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} “Critical Inquiry, October, and Historicizing French Theory,” \textit{French Theory in America}, 204-205.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 211.
politics,” as Schwartz and Balsamo note, it wasn’t a neutral one. Furthermore, the exclusion of women and people of colour during the first fifteen years of the project is disconcerting in light of the political and cultural movements spearheaded by these constituencies. If the project was inherently transdisciplinary, what are the effects of its discourse? What can we learn about the meeting of French theory and American writing through the lens of Semiotext(e)?

**Madness and Prisons**

Lotringer’s original bridging of French theory and American culture was conducted at a conference that was dedicated to madness and prisons. In order to better understand the shared emergence of these themes at the Schizo-Culture conference and in the Semiotext(e) publications that would follow, it is important to trace the way that these themes were explored prior to their meeting. While the prominence of the theme in French and American writing is undeniable, the discourses circulate around specific contexts; Burroughs’s experiences with madness and discipline, for example, are associated with the institutionalization of friends, the Cold War and the FBI, his experiences with drugs, and the killing of his wife, experiences that are both autobiographical and nation-bound. Félix Guattari’s obsession with madness was a result of his working relationship with psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan whom he abandoned in favour of pursuing schizoanalysis with Jean Oury at La Borde, and Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze were involved with Groupe d’Information des Prisons, a group whose purpose was to provide a venue for prisoners themselves to speak. Furthermore, French intellectual activity in the early 1970’s cannot be divorced from the events of May ‘68, the struggles within the university, the anti-psychiatry movement, and the increasingly precarious position of the French Communist Party. Once again, these themes are bound to autobiographical, national, and historical contexts. What happens to this theme when it is divorced from its specific contexts? Because Lotringer refuses to provide metacommentary, we need to ask how American and French writing on these topics resonates? Given the specificity of individual projects, how might this writing clash? How is this orchestrated transdiscursivity perhaps appropriate to the context of New York in the late 1970s?
TERRORIST POLITICS

Terrorism has always been at the forefront of Semiotext(e)’s concerns. Lotringer notes: “When I started Semiotext(e) in 1974 we were in the last gasp of Marxism, and I knew the terrorists were right, but I could not condone their actions. That is still the way I feel right now”\textsuperscript{17}. Semiotext(e) has published a great deal on the subject of terrorism, not only publishing works by Burroughs, Acker, Deleuze, and Guattari on the topic, but also including manifestoes by Ulrike Meinhof of the German Bader-Meinhof gang, and devoting an entire issue to the Italy Autonomia movement. Peter Lamborn Wilson, editor of the Autonomedia arm of Semiotext(e), has written widely on the topic of “poetic terrorism” under the name Hakim Bey. Does Semiotext(e), as an intervention into cultural politics, operate terroristically? What is the currency of Semiotext(e)’s discourse on terror in light of the contemporary obsession with, and control of, this discourse?

If the ontological status of fragmentation is to be given serious consideration, there may be a powerful potentiality that lies dormant in an insistence that is perpetually constitutive, not constituted. Giorgio Agamben considers constitutive power in his recent work on the State of Exception in order to expose the mechanics that underlie U.S. exceptionalism on the one hand, and the bare life of political prisoners on the other, a biopolitical production of bare life that is real, terrifying, and bleak\textsuperscript{18}. If we consider this constitutive moment alongside writings upon, and histories that bear witness to, a logic of fragmentation, however, it might be enabling to latch onto the temporal fragment that constitutive power simultaneously lays bare: what are the potentialities of this constitutive moment? As Hakim Bey argues in his famous tract on the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), a tract that inspired the tactics of US-based activist groups such as Guerilla Girls and \textsuperscript{®}™ark:

The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen before the State can crush it... The TAZ is thus a perfect tactic for an

\textsuperscript{17} “History of Semiotext(e)”, 15.
era in which the State is omnipresent and all-powerful and yet simulta-
necessarily riddled with cracks and vacancies.\textsuperscript{19}

This description succinctly captures a politics of the signifier which,
in light of a signifying chain which provides inadequate modes of rep-
resentation, forges alternative spaces of content and expression. Is this,
perhaps, an apt description of the politics of Semiotext(e)?

**CONCLUSION: A NEW METHODOLOGY**

Just as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that “May ’68 did not
take place,” the same can be said about Schizo-Culture, or, more largely,
the convergence of French poststructuralism and American postmod-
ernism. Deleuze and Guattari argue that “there is always one part of the
event that is irreducible to any social determinism, or to causal chains,”
and that this irreducibility “is an opening onto the possible” which can
never be outdated\textsuperscript{20}. What the arrival of French poststructuralist theory
in America has to offer, in contradistinction to the theorists who, with
the exception of Derrida, introduced structuralism to America at the
Johns Hopkins conference in 1966, is an impulse towards perpetual con-
nections and possibilities, a refusal of circumscription that has every-
thing to do with fragmentation and the intricate play of borders that
fragmentation not only makes possible, but necessitates. This is what led
Deleuze to comment upon “The Superiority of Anglo-American
Literature,” an anti-tradition within which he recognized a constant rev-
elation of ruptures, impulses towards flight and becoming, and relation-
ships with various outsides\textsuperscript{21}. If Fredric Jameson’s Marxist method is to
tease out the dialectical impulse towards utopia within cultural works,
Deleuze’s suggestion, one that is not only shared by his French poststruc-
turalist contemporaries but which also mirrors Burroughs’s cut-ups,
Acker’s plagiarism, Cage’s mesostics, and so on, is experimentation and
rhizomatics: to forge connections with an outside because “when one

\textsuperscript{19} T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic

\textsuperscript{20} “May ’68 Did Not Take Place,” trans. Robert Hardwick Weston, Hatred of
Capitalism, a Reader, KRAUS Chris and LÖTRINGER Sylvère (eds.) New York:
Semiotext(e), 2001, 209.

Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, New York: Columbia University
writes, the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to work.”

Because Lotringer, with Semiotext(e), opted for a similar approach – juxtaposing texts without metacommentary or editorial notes in order to stage cultural interventions – his project provides us with a unique perspective on the convergence of French poststructuralist theory and American postmodernism. Similar to William Burroughs’s advocacy of tape recorder experiments (like playing the sounds of a riot in the midst of a calm crowd in order to produce specific effects), Lotringer notes that:

Ce qui m’a intéressé ça n’a pas été d’importer la théorie française “en général” aux États-Unis, mais de mettre en circulation dans des secteurs particuliers de la réalité américaine des concepts précis selon des modes d’insertion spécifiques (par la revue, par des événements publics, conférences, concerts, performances, par des livres conçus en vue de toucher un certain public). La Schizo-culture, en somme, ce n’était pas du tout la France, ou la pensée française, c’était la réalité new-yorkaise, le heart of darkness du capitalisme contemporain, et c’est cela que j’ai toujours cherché à cerner dans mon travail.

Lotringer’s project, then, is all about conceptual insurgency and relational interplay. Rather than aiming for fidelity to a circumscribed set of writings, he is more interested in the way that de/re-contextualized material can radically alter reified landscapes. This breakdown of spatial borders is echoed by the breakdown of temporal ones. Lotringer affectionately calls Semiotext(e)’s Foreign Agents series, a series of little black books by French theorists that were released over the course of the 80s and 90s, “cumulative time bombs” because it often took as long as a decade for these names to catch, Deleuze and Guattari being a prime example, after he introduced them, in translation, to a North American audience, suggesting that their insistence remains constitutive. How might we make use, today, of the suggestive relations that Lotringer has forged?

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