

Review of Kirby Olson, *Andrei Codrescu and the Myth of America*
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Kirby Olson's book defies categories, just like its subject, the idiosyncratic author Andrei Codrescu, who comes from the land of the originators of Dada. Olson traces the "surrealist vein" (19) or tradition in Codrescu's oeuvre. He tries to grasp Codrescu's elusive figure and the abundant work of poetry, novels, essays, and other media rich in humor, paradoxes, piercing observations and lyrical details, in order to locate Surrealism in his work and activities in a broad sense (21). Each chapter is an attempt to nail down one of Codrescu's many personae: the Monte Rio commune hipster, the Paris visitor, the Romanian poet, the suburban Baltimore family man, the wanderer, and the National Public Radio commentator—to mention but a few—all of whom came to this country at the age of eighteen "seeking for an America which was born in the Eastern European imagination" (50).

Andrei Codrescu and the Myth of America is not a scholarly work. It is not a monograph, nor an analysis. It does not walk the reader through the life and works of Codrescu in any systematic way. Olson has written an impressionistic series of episodic mini-essays attempting to capture Codrescu the post-surrealist Surrealist, who does not befit any cluster of critical theory. Nevertheless, Olson makes repeated efforts to construct a theoretical context for him.

One of Codrescu's insights is that the matter-of-fact description of certain aspects of life in Eastern Europe passes for Surrealism or Dada outside the region. Reality is absurd, and absurdity is real: Codrescu, as far as he is inspired by Eastern Europe, is a realist, just as Franz Kafka's story of Gregor Samsa who wakes up one morning as a cockroach is, in its core, a realistic description of a mental experience. Reality and sur-reality do not clearly separate in Eastern Europe, and Codrescu makes good use of his early experience as an American poet and writer. After all, Eastern Europe in general, and his native Romania in particular, are not as different from the rest of the world as most people like to think, and

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Codrescu keeps rubbing in this observation (“the whole world is Balkanized,” 40).

To drive his point home, Codrescu playfully and seductively exaggerates. He juggles the personae and functions of the poet, the entertainer, the writer, the humorist, and the public intellectual. In language that is often hard to separate from Codrescu’s, Olson follows Codrescu’s multi-persona figure that keeps serving up surprising and obviously stylized, even distorted, facts, sure that it is precisely the witty distortions which will best highlight the actual truth. For example, Olson quotes Codrescu’s play on the myth of Dracula (37), giving the region “Transylvania” rather than “Romania” as his native country. Codrescu colorfully describes Count Dracula as “Satan’s chief of staff,” and identifies him as “the chief deity” of Halloween. Halloween, he claims, has outweighed Christmas “as the nation’s greatest holiday,” which easily leads him to the conclusion that “Dracula is replacing Jesus Christ.” Now that, as the reader knows full well, is a stretch. However, Codrescu speaks in a tone that excuses him for talking apparent nonsense, and he directs the reader’s attention and imagination to some kind of lingering element of truth in all his freewheeling talk. He addresses the clichés snugly ensconced in most people’s minds because they are the easiest to lampoon. The horror-cliché exploits the reader’s fascination with fear while reassuring him or her that it is fictitious. After all, what Codrescu points out in this buoyant paragraph is that the strange and the foreign are horrifying, and you love to be horrified as long as you know that you do not really have to be afraid.

Codrescu’s humor, essay writing, and his sense for the absurd are fundamentally rational. He combines the voice of a lucid observer with the attitude of comedians like the Marx brothers. He taps the same source of humor: the clash of common sense with an actual reality that leaves one stupefied by the nonsense one runs into at every step of the way.

Writing a book about Codrescu is a challenge. The more so, because Codrescu is “not yet half through with [his] life” (1) nor, thus, his work, as he himself points out in the foreword. Apart from his many personae, he is hard to nail down as a citizen, too. He is an exile: Romanian, Jewish, and American, but none completely. He is an outsider in his native country as well as his chosen country—a position he carefully safeguards even when shaping America’s culture in his capacity as a public intellectual. He is also an anti-authoritarian rebel, another position he does not surrender. Codrescu programmatically escapes categorization of every sort, due to his deep-set desire to slip out of every bracket and to play on his own terms.

So is he a Surrealist? A Dadaist? Or any -ist?

Kirby Olson offers a collage of tentative answers. In the introduction subtitled “Codrescu/Benjamin: Surreal Urbanism,” he points out similarities between Walter Benjamin’s *Arcade Project* as urban mythology, and Codrescu’s taste for urban life and interest in childhood memories. Featuring light-handed statements that remain unproven, the

introduction anticipates some of the features of the chapters that follow. Quick mentions of Gilles Deleuze, Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Hélène Cixous, Marx, Breton, and others alternate with citations that replace arguments, and quick-silver statements, that are not followed by analysis. Olson seems to be so fascinated by Codrescu as a multi-ego personality, prolific writer and poet, that he mirrors his elusiveness in his own writing. The reader receives snippets of Codrescu's life—some details repetitiously mentioned, like his allegedly “Berlitz fake” accent (36), his INS problems (36, 38), his feeling of having become American (64, 70), and quotes from various of his works without an overview of his oeuvre to date.

The fundamental issues revisited throughout the book are Codrescu's insider/outsider status, and his experiences of totalitarianism in Romania and capitalism in America, and the relationship between his intellectual work and politics. Codrescu comes across as both an insider and outsider in the spaces he has inhabited. This complex issue could be addressed in depth and in much detail, but the reader has to put up with statements that do not amount to either a narrative or critical analysis: “Codrescu has been an outsider almost from birth, and yet his effervescence triumphed over his would-be victimizers and he can now move back and forth between inside and outside at will” (34); “The consummate outsider, Dracula, combined with a surrealist appeal, have turned Codrescu into a considerable cultural force” (3); “Outside of his own national boundaries, Codrescu is extremely difficult to understand” (39); “As an outsider looking in, he has built a reputation that may eventually make him into a member of the American canon” (39); “Just as prisoners make the best wardens, so outsiders will make the best preservers of our traditions” (39); “By playing the role of outsider, Codrescu has become an insider” (41); “Politics require an inside and an outside, while poetry must play on the line between them” (44). More citations could follow. The author writes in overarching statements that do not transcend the commonplace, and are always left up in the air or, at best, are supported by a quote from a theoretical work but without weaving the quote into a consistent concept. The title of Chapter 3, “Poetry/Politics: Codrescu as Surrealist Citizen?” promises to go in depth on the question of whether Codrescu is a Surrealist or not. The question, however, remains unanswered. Instead, we read about Romanian intellectuals' favorite game, “The Exquisite Corpse,” and the journal that Codrescu edited and published with this same title; his problems with the INS and the FBI upon his arrival to America; the early Romanian absurdist Urmuz; Dadaist Tristan Tzara; the substantial role of Jewish intellectuals in the culture of Romania; and that Codrescu is an American poet in the tradition of Frank O'Hara. Olson, of course, has a plethora of reasons to categorize Codrescu as a Surrealist, but he does so without offering, at the least, a broad definition of Surrealism as a working frame of reference. As there is only a vague consensus about the boundaries of Surrealism, it is puzzling to read that at some point, Codrescu “goes down and down into the middle of surrealist America” (55). One wonders what *is* surrealist America? We are given several even

more puzzling attempts at grasping it. For example, he asks:

Can we have a society that is based on playful thinking? (...) It seems more and more that this is the new utopia that was outlined by Surrealism, one perhaps more in keeping with the work of utopian Charles Fourier, than Karl Marx. (...) Codrescu writes (...): 'America is de facto surrealist. There is no need to upset 'reality' here. 'Reality is manufactured continually.' (49)

Olson ties Codrescu to American Surrealism also because he chose to live in New Orleans, considering, at least in hindsight, that many writers found New Orleans' "genteel decrepitude well suited to dreaming" (18). Although he quotes a casual remark of Codrescu's, Olson fails to clarify the meaning of "dream" in the context of Surrealism. André Breton understands "dream" in the Freudian sense, a "psychic activity (...) taking into consideration only the time of pure dreaming, that is the dream of sleep," while Codrescu uses the word in the sense of musing, daydreaming, or imagining things.¹ All these activities are part of the surrealist landscape, but "dream" is one of the few central technical terms of Surrealism one cannot mess with; one has to clearly define it in a text on, or related to, Surrealism.

The question of Codrescu's political views and experience is handled with similar hesitation. The book includes many of his political *bon mots*, representing him as an anarcho-hipster rebel and anti-Stalinist who is unfailingly on the right side of every divide, except for Olson's misgivings about Codrescu's passion for guns. There are brief paragraphs on the importance of poetry in totalitarian dictatorships scattered all over the book (e.g., 48), but the political landscape is not described in a coherent way. Ceausescu's Romania is referred to episodically in Chapter 12, "Good/Evil: Ceausescu," and the reader only learns what exactly happened in December 1989 from one of the appendices in excerpts from an essay by Roxana Maria Crisan (in which the name of a key figure, Reverend László Tökés, is consistently misspelled).

In conclusion, *Andrei Codrescu and the Myth of America* fails to deliver what it presumably intended to accomplish. The attempt to enmesh Codrescu's work into the fabric of critical theory and American Surrealism remains unconvincing: to insert him credibly into the discourse marked by the names of Nietzsche, Deleuze, Guattari, Lyotard, Hannah Arendt, and many other thinkers cited in the book would take a greater effort and a more articulate, autonomous vision by the author. The appendix includes interviews that the author conducted with Codrescu, "On his novel *Messiah*," "On Poetry," "On Politics," and "On the Novel *Wakefield*." They are witty, personal exchanges where the author's theoretical approach sometimes frontally collides with Codrescu's anti-intellectual persona, although at some points Codrescu concedes to reasoning through and interpreting other poets or thinkers. However, Olson's book is colorful and reads well, and one of its successes is

the vivid evocation of Codrescu's shrewd ideas, courageous life, lively voice and teasing intonation.

1 André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), in Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 10-11.