

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

Date : March 8, 2007

July 29th 1929 to March 6th 2007

Academic creates genuine breakthrough in thinking about key issues with carefully composed original thesis. Comes to be better known. Responds to the hype by writing pretentious, largely ungrounded but clever sounding prose about more or less everything. After a while best known through journalism about this latter work, while original contribution is largely forgotten.

Jean Baudrillard would hardly be the only academic to pass through such a trajectory, but he was, to my mind, one of the clearest exemplars of it. Most of the obituaries currently being written, concentrate on his writings about the simulacrum. Frankly I have always considered this to be pretty worthless. But it was certainly his most influential contribution. The effects were dire.

Amongst the worst were a certain phase of excruciatingly awful cultural studies writing based in Australia amongst other places. I also suspect that some of the worst hype about virtual reality was written in the hope that the internet would finally live up to some of the hype that Baudrillard had generated about the world in general. Interestingly, from the perspective of an obituary, some of the most informed discussion were in books with titles such as 'Forget Baudrillard'.

What all this misses is the reason Jean Baudrillard came to academic attention in the first place.

Initially he wrote a couple of books such as *The Mirror of Production* which were quite early attempts to theorise consumption, largely within a structuralist and semiotic vein. I saw his highpoint as represented by the book with a mouthful of a title 'For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign.' Written in 1972 (translated in 1981) this was an extremely impressive re-working of some basic ideas of Marx in order to demonstrate that radical thinking had to take seriously issues of consumption that were neglected in the Marxist emphasis upon production. It gave the theoretical underpinning to attempts to analyse that which had been dismissed as superstructure or superficial under the auspices of what he called sign value. He also argued the importance of this for developing a serious study of areas such as the art world and media. All of this makes him quite properly seen as one of the key ancestors of what later developed as cultural studies. Mind you it certainly helps if, as I do, you retain a soft spot for Marx's own writing and theorising.

The problem was that having argued cogently for why these areas should be taken seriously and not seen as merely superficial, his own writing became itself increasingly superficial and slight. The result was merely to return the objects of his enquiry back into the appearance of superficiality and the superficiality of appearance. This was why I think ultimately he became much more of a negative than a positive influence upon academic genres such as cultural studies. But it would be a pity if all this later more problematic work means that his original important contributions were to now become entirely forgotten. So my epitaph would be 'Forget the later Baudrillard, but resurrect the early work'.

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