

Baudrillard: A Remembrance of Things Unpassed

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I first met Jean Baudrillard at a conference Sylvere Lottringer of Semiotext(e) organized in Las Vegas several years ago. The idea of the conference was about chance processes. Needless to say, with the Whiskey Casino as the backdrop for the conference, and randomness as the main motif of the situation, the soundtrack of the constant churning of slot machine wheels and pulleys, and the continuous movement of the attendees between speeches and gambling, it all seemed totally appropriate. Baudrillard gave his speech dressed in a gold suit in simulation of Elvis, and I ran my speech through various software processes to turn it into the sound of water. When I look back at the moment, it seems crystal clear that we were at the edge of an aesthetic and philosophical ocean turn in how people put ideas together in the era of hyper media. Since that time, simple things like wireless networks, the ubiquity of the iPod, global media events like 9/11 or the SARS virus, have all brought home how prescient his thought was. The world knows Baudrillard as the philosopher who gave us a cautionary tale about simulation, and if the events of today – the war in Iraq, the economics of globalization, Katrina's destruction of New Orleans – have told us that in no uncertain terms, we live in a world with a more and more tenuous grasp of the "reality" underpinning the myths of the present day. In a world where bleak man made landscapes and the psychological effects of technological, social and environmental developments cannot be denied, his words were a beacon of how we can reason through the myriad ways that we humans have displaced the natural world. For me as a just graduating student in the early mid 90's, Baudrillard seemed like a figure who cut through the haze of post-everything American cultural malaise. I studied French literature at a time when it seemed that America was enthralled by the end of the Cold War – my studies were populated with people like Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Althusser, Lacan, bounded by Badiou, Kristeva, Cixous, Irigaray, Wittig... The list goes on but you get the point: these figures are part of a pantheon where, perhaps, one of the common themes is a simple cry for new ways to perceive how the mass media-landscape inadvertently invades and splinters the private mind of the individual.

What Baudrillard did for me was make the world safe for doubt: doubt about the intentions of governments, corporations, ideologies, and yes, people. Like J.G. Ballard or Bruce Sterling, his work hovered between descriptions of the world in present tense and the strange and uncanny networks that hold together "the real." For him, like the 'simulacrum' following DeBord's 'spectacle' where 'revolution' became synonymous with hyper-consumerism and something everyone did against the name of 'freedom,' but that's freedom of choice, of course. I don't mean to say anything here, I wonder about the doubting that once swayed the world.

Today, I wrote this piece traveling on a flight between Tokyo and Istanbul, and as I sit here and use a wireless network in the coffee lounge of the Hotel Buyuk Londra, I re-read him as doubting everything – it's as if Baudrillard says never model a thought about anything unless you can say it to yourself. The thought lingers, and links to a meta-critique: it posits modern thought as withdrawn, proffered as kind of a peripheral speech. At the birth of the 21st century, at the birth of the new New World, of suicide bombers, insane Presidents, multi-media equipped private armies and fundamentalist militias, his words bear reviewing: Baudrillard – a voice that says the seductions of reality are what we now hold dear. We speak the world. Reform, remix, re-engineer the consent of the Western world. We need this analysis more than ever. Vietnam is now long gone. Flip the script and think: for us children of the late 20th century, memory is a scarce resource. In the rear view mirror - May 68 was almost forty years ago and most of us young people have never thought of burning monks, Chairman Mao, Stalin, or the origins of half of today's problems. I think back to an almost innocent moment in the mid 1990's when Baudrillard with a gold suit, made people remember that the chance processes of the world are what give us joy. With a simple flourish, I think that he set the tone for many young artists, writers, and musicians, to remember a simple thing: that another world is possible.

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