

“L’informe” And “Seduction”

In this essay I will discuss Georges Batailles’ concept of “l’informe” and my understanding of Jean Baudrillard’s model of femininity and its subtle operation of seduction as a possible example of “l’informe” or the formless. I will begin with Batailles’ description, or definition of the formless.

“A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words but their tasks. Thus the formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or a spit.”

Bataille tells us that the status of something is dependent upon our understanding it; understanding requires something to have an identifiable form and a function. Indeed that this process of understanding, of identification and assignment of worth is the purpose of philosophy. Therefore to be formless is to be troublesome, is to not fit into the matrix with its web of meanings. The formless negates meaning, as it exists beyond its rigidity threatening its hierarchy. The “spider” and the “spit” are named as having no rights, but are also linked to the universe by Bataille, denoting his understanding of the universe as formless. The “spit” is at once raised from its state of disregard. A microcosmic example of man’s inability to actually comprehend outside of simple structures centred about himself. We would try to force the formless like an invisible man into that “mathematical frock coat”, so that he could be seen, and assigned a name and a worth within the exchange system of meaning. The formless is not the opposite of form; it is outside any binary oppositional construct of meaning, and therefore occupies a space beyond language, yet we try to pursue it. As if chasing it with a butterfly net of words, it shifts and retreats, offering glimmerings of itself to us from time to time. In the spaces between, in the holes in the mapping, occluded in the unvalued. In the dimly lit area of my mind designated to the formless I stumbled across a mannequin with a constantly morphing face, a creature with no truth to be revealed. I had encountered it before but did not know it might reside there. This creature is the feminine as Baudrillard defines it, not defined in opposition to the masculine, as he understands this construct itself as masculine. The feminine is far more elusive and seems to exist independently.

“The feminine however, is, and has always been, somewhere else. That is the secret of its strength. Just as it is said that something lasts because its existence is not adequate to its essence,”pg6

As though the energy invested in manifesting the feminine is so minimal that it leaves a large reserve behind in its essence outside of our world. Maybe in

the world that I referred to earlier, which offers us glimpses of itself from time to time. Baudrillard seems to share a sense of there being another parallel existence, beyond the structures that define and provide the parameters for meaning to function

“One may catch the glimpse of another parallel universe (the two never meet) with the decline of psychoanalysis and sexuality as strong structures”pg7

Here in Baudrillard's world the feminine operates through play and appearances, is amorphous and reveals no truth. It does not seek to define itself or anything else. Its reversible nature confounds truths. In flux, the essence of femininity remains suspended outside; the essence remains larger than its existence immeasurable and unknowable. The feminine does not oppose the masculine, it thwarts attempts to set it against anything and so resists re-entry, this is where the power of the feminine lies in Baudrillard's model. The feminine is

“Interpreted in terms of play, challenges, duels, the strategy of appearances—that is, the terms of seduction.”pg7

Baudrillard discusses seduction in a specific way, as separate to and independent to sexuality, or physical anatomy. As a process of playful illusions outside of physicality. It is seduction's ability to operate outside of these structures that makes it such a powerful tool in the armoury of the feminine.

“It is easier for a non-female female than for a real woman, already legitimated by her sex, to move amongst the signs and take seduction to the limit. Only the non-female/female can exercise an untainted fascination, because s/he is more seductive than sexual. The fascination is lost when the real sex shows through;” pg13

Baudrillard embodies his argument about the operation of seduction as independent to gender and sexuality through his discussion of Nico.

“Nico seemed so beautiful only because her femininity appeared so completely put on. She emanated something more than beauty, something more sublime, a different seduction. And there was deception: she was a false drag queen, a real woman, in fact, playing the queen.” Pg13

Seduction in Baudrillard's model is a truly formless incarnation. The slipperiness of this concept of the feminine empowered through seduction, a playful and mischievous sprite is at odds with the understandable desire of women for women's voices to be heard, and to be admitted to the structures of power, for a women's discourse to be nurtured and developed, so that it can contribute to the future. In Baudrillard's discourse in an attempt to create a more egalitarian society women have stepped within the imitations of the material, of the manifest, and the structures of power. Whilst the essence of feminine power lies beyond these structures, and beyond words to discuss it. He argues that the women's movement has failed to acknowledge or

understand the process of seduction, because they regard it as part of an artificial presentation of the body.

“They do not understand that seduction represents mastery over the symbolic universe, while power represents only mastery of the real universe. The sovereignty of seduction is incommensurable with the possession of political or sexual power.”pg8

If Baudrillard and myself can glimpse this other world, beyond the structures of meanings and understandings, then so can others, and the approach to the feminine and its operation of seduction is not gendered. Then why should we not start our speculative journey from a position of equality? I amongst others would not be at university if women had not forced their way into the structures of power linguistic and actual. Independent of whether it should be this way, Batailles identification of the formless points out the fate of that which remains formless, it “ gets itself squashed everywhere,” So one does not have much choice but to enter into structures of power, even if the females strength is in her nothingness, like the spider and the universe.

“Contrary to every search for a womans speech etc, the claim here is that the female is nothing, and that is her strength” pg14

By attempting to relate the actual, the experience of the real universe to Baudrillards model of seduction, or to Batailles definition of the formless, I fall prey to the contradiction of firstly trying to pin down what is unfixable, and maybe cannot be translated into a discussion rooted in everyday life. Secondly I look for answers in the manifest world when the answers lie elsewhere. I feel like I have taken some rusty, blunt scissors to a doves wings in attempting to discuss the inform in relation to the process of seduction, and then returning to the mundane. Maybe a sense of an understanding of the gulf between our world and the world of the formless lies in this feeling, of having been returned to earth, as if from a fair ground ride, where we spun fascinated by the refracted lights, isolated in an experiential reality. Suddenly the magic is stripped away and everything is accountable. The formless like a shadow present by lamplight, slipped away when the main light went back on and broke the spell.