

THE CULTURAL SIGN

By Victor Margolin

Pierre Blancmange is a prominent French deconstructionist who holds distinguished professorships at seven American universities, while also serving as Professeur Titulaire at the Institut des Hautes Etudes in Paris. I had an opportunity to interview Professor Blancmange at a recent conference on “Deconstructing the Supermarket: Food, the Body, and the Consuming Self.” Of particular interest to me was how he managed to hold so many professorships at one time. “That’s because I am a cultural sign,” he replied. I asked the professor to explain this appellation. “Well,” he said, “a cultural sign is an image. Contrary to the belief of many of my misguided colleagues who praise Walter Benjamin for eulogizing the death of the aura, it is not dead yet. Universities are hungry for images of success that enable them to position themselves favorably in the global academic economy. A cultural sign brings attention to an institution and this is frequently followed by alumni contributions, a rise in the quality of graduate applications, favorable dispensations from state legislatures, offers to endow new chairs and buildings, and many other benefits. A cultural sign really doesn’t have to do anything,” Blancmange continued, “not even be in residence. Those who do show up for work never teach more than one course a year.”

“But how does a university justify their salaries?” I asked. “Let me explain,” he responded. “The university profits from the aura of their status in the intellectual community.” “Do you mean,” I asked incredulously, “that they may be more useful if they teach very little and spend most of their time on the road?”

“Exactly,” he said. “They serve the university better by not being there but instead going to conferences and speaking at other universities. In fact, the less they are on campus, the more valuable they are to the institution.”

“Is that why you are able to hold eight professorships simultaneously?” I asked.

Yes,” he replied. “Of course, I spend at least a week a year at each university and in some instances more.”

“But what do you do when you are in residence?”

“Oh,” he said, “I usually lunch or dine with the Provost, offer a seminar to a group of graduate students, spend some time in the business office going over my accounts; things like that.”

“But don’t students expect more?” I posed.

“Not really. I have a well-trained assistant at each university, in most cases a young professor who studied with me in Paris and who runs the classes and explains my thought to the students. Then when I come in, I simply reinforce what they have been learning, and bring them up to date on new directions in my pensée.”

“How then,” I asked, “does one become a cultural sign?” This seemed to me something worth striving for. “Well,” Blancmange responded in his impeccable English, “its really not so easy. There are three aspects of it. One is reputation, the second is an already high salary level, and the third is marketability.” Blancmange’s mention of marketability was a bit shocking for a distinguished professor of deconstruction but, upon reflection, I realized that one of the central tenets of deconstruction theory is that nothing has intrinsic value anymore. Everything has become commodified. Professor Blancmange was simply following current trends. He had managed to globalize himself by reviving Benjamin’s lost aura and maintaining a simultaneous presence in many different places by virtue of an army of assistants who did his work for him and acolytes who received sufficient intensity from his rare visits to be satisfied until they saw him again.

So, it was really about markets after all. Philosophy, deconstruction, English literature, were only a front, the veneer that made cultural signs like Blancmange marketable. But the identities of these signs were not as stable as one might have liked. If being a cultural sign was really about markets, then marketability also depended on demand, and this could change. However, I imagined, a cultural sign like Blancmange was smart enough to nail down tough long-term contracts that would insure his salary for years to come. Even if one’s power as a sign faded, it was still possible to remain on the circuit and continue to collect paychecks. The other point to consider, however, is that those who attain the stature of a cultural sign are also wise enough to change their thought as the intellectual zeitgeist shifts. After all, that is the postmodern part of being a sign. They are inherently unstable.

Blancmange pointed out that the phenomenon of cultural signs had begun in the booming eighties when universities understood that the quickest way to excellence was through identity branding rather than sloggng through tedious curriculum reforms and changes in admissions policies. They were willing to pay the high salaries to acquire a few cultural signs who could put them on the academic map. It was at this time that a bevy of decently paid scholars flocked from excellent institutions to mediocre ones that were striving to reinvent themselves. In doing so, they demanded salaries far beyond what even

university presidents were making but then again, the institutions paid because they saw the possibility of an easy identity change.

Once in place, the cultural signs began to hire promising but relatively unknown younger faculty with whom they could build eminent graduate departments. For these faculty, such positions served as launching pads for them to become the next generation of cultural signs. The young faculty from the best graduate programs entered these striving universities at comparatively high salaries and were poised, after several years in the boondocks, to leap back to a top institution at a salary that was as inflated, though proportionally so, as those of their seniors. So that's how it works, I thought. It takes a backwater university to pay the first round of inflated salaries so that the younger scholars can establish a base for their next move.

The final question I asked Blancmange was how these cultural signs, both junior and senior, managed to maintain such high rates of productivity. After all, one heard stories of scholars who were publishing no less than four books a year, speaking at conferences all over the world, hosting PBS television series, and directing study centers with armies of doctoral students. "That's easy," he said, "its all done by assistants. They go to the library and look up the references, then they take notes from the sources, and organize everything according to an outline that the professor gives them. When all the material is collected and organized, the professor then sits down for a concentrated period of time and bangs out the manuscript. Others put in the footnotes, do the editing, prepare the index and so forth.

"Hosting a television series is simple. You just show up and read the script that someone else wrote. And graduate students are advised by assistants who refer occasionally to the senior professor whom they ask simply to approve their work. He or she is usually too busy meeting with foundation officials and wealthy donors to spend time with a student."

At last I understood how the system worked. In the age of simulacra, cultural signs were worth far more to a university in brand value than the salaries they were paid. After all, there were still genteel traditions in the academy that moderated the legendary greed that well known pop cultural celebrities were famous for. After all, no cultural sign had yet demanded a percentage of tuition revenue.