

In Memory of Jean-Pierre Desaulniers

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My friend Jean-Pierre Desaulniers died on August 18, 2005. Writing these words returns me to the feelings of emptiness, anger, and loss that I felt when I first learned of his death. Though my loss is small indeed compared to that of Jean-Pierre's partner, Claire, his family, and the friends, colleagues, and students who saw more of Jean-Pierre than I did over the nearly 25 years we knew each other. Writing about Jean-Pierre is painful, reminding me that I'll never see him again, but also redemptive, enabling me to testify to the importance of Jean-Pierre's life and his contribution to media scholarship. It is a rediscovery of my friend's thinking—alive in his works—as much as a reminder that there will be no more of them and him. For those who knew and loved Jean-Pierre, an obituary like this needs no explanation or justification. For those who knew him better or longer than I did, I apologize for what I've missed or misrecognized. But for those to whom "Desaulniers, J-P" is just a dusty entry in a bibliography, an explanation is owed.

Desaulniers' forays into television and the culture of everyday life offer an exemplary engagement with the concrete and the empirical. Refusing facile generalizations, Jean-Pierre's work engages consistently with the forces of social reproduction and practice in a non-reified way: the subject of his analysis stays alive rather than being reduced to an abstraction. Where he considers the effect of television on politics, as in his essay on the miniseries *Duplessis* (1982b), or launches a stinging critique of the sensational press' glib mobilization of familiar narrative tropes to filter and recast events, as in "La presse *judiciaire* ou la barbarie chez soi" (1982c), he does so in a Brechtian manner. Our comfortable assumptions are acknowledged, represented, and then productively disturbed. The process is invariably one in which the disturbed reader is offered compensating pleasures: those of the aesthete, evident in the wit and inventiveness of Desaulniers' use of language, and of the pedagogue, exemplified in his clarification of the world.

Desaulniers' scholarship was anthropological rather than sociological, rooted in the concrete and presented from the inside to the outside, his stance ethical and humanistic rather than the reified analysis of positivist social science. Desaulniers opened his readers' understanding to embrace experiences and practices they, we,

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might otherwise have spurned. His writing is accessible and a model of the power of metaphor and allusion to generalize without losing the richness of the concrete and specific. The empirical elements in Jean-Pierre's work were central to its strength but also limited its resonance outside Québec. His engagement with the world in which his fellows lived enabled him to clarify that world so others could navigate it and thus shape their own place in it, more securely. One can see this in a host of instances. In his identification of the small recurrences of daily life as the glue that holds a secular society together: "les commerciaux télévisés ont remplacé la litanie des Vêpres" (Desaulniers & Sohet, 1982, p. 148); in his mould-breaking take on television, *La télévision en vrac* (1982a), and in his last published work, "L'affaire Michaëlle Jean" (2005), his reflections on the Governor Generalship of Canada in *Le Devoir*. The *Devoir* article is vintage Deso—succinct, impish, verbally inventive, and melding a barbed and lethal wit with a gentle, compassionate, and constructive engagement with public events.

This melancholy task of obituary writing thus yields pleasure as well as pain. For to re-read Jean-Pierre's work is to re-encounter his wit, perspicacity, and moral engagement with the world. Many of the pleasures of our friendship are thus rediscovered. Let us then turn, with pleasure, to Jean-Pierre's books, *La télévision en vrac* (1982a), *Mine de rien* (1982, written with Phillippe Sohet), *De la famille Plouffe à la petite vie : Les québécois et leurs téléromans* (1996), and *Le phénomène Star Académie* (2004). Though there is other work scattered in a host of places and in different forms, these books make permanently accessible Jean-Pierre's lethal prose and his distinctive perceptions.

Television is a peculiarly fugitive medium, less susceptible to historical rediscovery than anything other than its non-identical broadcasting twin, radio. Desaulniers' histories not only captured the social and emotional resonances of the medium, its genres (none more than the *téléroman*) and its programs, but also offered a perceptive and extraordinarily well informed history of the aesthetic evolution of television. Sophie St. Jacques' obituary of Jean-Pierre in *La Presse* (2005) well epitomized Jean-Pierre's work on the *téléroman* when she described him as "notre mémoire de la télévision." Desaulniers' observations on Québec's television history opened the door to understanding the international matrix in which contemporary cultural production takes place. It enabled me to understand how a television rhetoric invented in Québec had been propagated internationally and domesticated in the U.K.: a domestication performed by Canadian television producers who migrated to the U.K. from the Plouffe-dominated, Canadian and Québécois television milieu to create the U.K.'s first *téléroman* in 1960. Desaulniers' last book, *Le phénomène Star Académie*, took further his account of the appropriation and transformation of international cultural forms.

Desaulniers' work revolves around the complementary propositions that behaviour and actions are symbolic and thus legible and that symbolic systems, such as television, are constitutive of social action and of the social itself. In one sense, of course, there is nothing new about this—Jean-Pierre's scholarship can be neatly filed as one more instance of the late-twentieth-century's "cultural turn"

in the social sciences and as a series of riffs on themes made familiar by Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Stuart Hall, and others. Jean-Pierre gave this idiolect a distinctive anthropological twist by interpreting the contemporary mass media in terms of established anthropological tropes: *Star Académie* (Desaulniers, 2004) as the mobilization of the myths of the noble savage and Cinderella; *Loft Story* (Desaulniers, 2003) as the negotiation of the taboo of death; the appointment of Michaëlle Jean as an appeasement of evil spirits (Desaulniers, 2005). But more important, and finally more distinctive, is the particular quality of Desaulniers' voice—one uncommon among academics and journalists. There is always an imaginative, empathetic engagement with the social actors in question: an engagement that I can only call ethical. Ordinary peoples' ordinary behaviour is considered from the inside and with respect.

Jean-Pierre's work testifies to his interest in cultivating a unique and individual relationship with texts. These required and were given proper consideration in all their specificity before making the move to broader, general patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction. That is why his prose is characteristically metaphorical and allusive. Metaphor, allusion, irony, and wit enabled him to hold together and represent in proper proportion the complexity and deep resonances of the concrete *vécu*. Consider, for example, the little chapter "La violence symbolique" in *Mine de rien* (1982d). Here Desaulniers sketches an encounter, simultaneously complicit and antagonistic, between a stripper and a drinker/voyeur: that is, between two sorts of power. The sketch goes beyond knee-jerk moralism to reveal the emotional depth and generality of the encounter—"ils avaient joué l'inceste"—and beyond the sanctity of the text to draw from the encounter a series of general propositions about the social. For Desaulniers, the codes in question are social codes that constitute, and are constituted by, social relationships. The details of ordinary encounters, such as that which the author situates precisely as "un lundi soir, coin Rosemont et de Lorimier, à Montréal, le 26 janvier 1981" (1982d, page 152), enact and thus reveal general social processes.

Fascination with the everyday, the demotic, and the vulgar is now the familiar small change of cultural and sociological scholarship. But the distinction in Jean-Pierre's work, in all senses of the word, comes both from his deft use of language and from his reflexivity. Not for him the reach for comfortable prescriptive norms after a cursory dip of the knee to the obdurate empirical *vécu*. Rather, the empirical, in all its messy abundance, is the starting point for a process of reflection and careful teasing out of meaning whereby Jean-Pierre identified the place in a general order of things of whatever had fascinated him.

Ever the good *anthropologue*, Jean-Pierre acknowledges his own implication in the events he narrates. In the above example of "coin Rosemont et de Lorimier" this location, for the privileged reader who knows, is not far from where Jean-Pierre lived, long before Rosemont once again became fashionable. His authorial voice subtly and, for those who knew the man as well as the avatar who writes, with delicious irony intrudes again when, as an instance of the general symbolic violence that suffuses society and has already been exemplified in the stripper/

voyeur reciprocity, he reminds us of the Université de Montréal's marketing slogan: "L'université de Montréal, parce que c'est l'Université de Montréal!" (1982d, page 154). Here we hear the voice of the author from the other side of the tracks—from Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), from Shawinigan, from a formation where the plastic pink flamingos on the lawn are of us rather than the marks of the cultural other. (The squeamish reader should take comfort that, so far as I know, no flamingo, pink or otherwise, figured in the décor chez Jean-Pierre.) Jean-Pierre was actually an alumnus of the Université de Montréal. After a *bac* in arts/humanities at the Collège de Shawinigan he did another *bac* and his *maîtrise* in anthropology at Université de Montréal before doctorates du *troisième cycle* in sociology at Paris and Tours.

Detailed references to his *quartier* "coin Rosemont et de Lorimier" acknowledge his implication in the process of enquiry. They take us to the core of Jean-Pierre's ethical stance—to his connectedness to the people, institutions, and behaviour about which he wrote. People deserve respect. Their quirks are our quirks. And their behaviour is neither easily categorizable (the scholarly impulse) nor does it deserve to be written off as an unthinking reflex of the duped and victimized (the moralistic impulse). To be sure, the world is informed by symbolic (and actual) violence—no soggy anything goes relativism in Jean-Pierre—but the pleasure people take in a *téléroman* or the act of displaying a sticker "J'aime ma femme" are best considered as starting points for reflection and exegesis. A heuristic process ensues in which the author and exigent acknowledged himself as both participant and subject.

Because he was honest enough to reflect on his own pleasures, Jean-Pierre respected those of others, some of which he shared, such as television, cigarettes, and golf—I could never understand the golf. But even when he didn't, he started from the presumption that if people did something, whatever it was, there was probably something behind it worth respecting. What was there required comprehension and explanation. See the terrific essay "La presse judiciaire ou la barbarie chez soi" (1982c), in which Jean-Pierre provided a scorching re-reading and re-writing of the sensational press' narrative of the death of Melanie Casselman. This habit of mind not only marked him out from the mainstream of scholarly commentators on television and from nationalists who anathematized the cultural hybridization that fascinated Jean-Pierre. This openness and generosity won him many friends. There are a striking number of touching testimonies by Jean-Pierre's former students and associates published in response to his death, including a blog of testimonials.¹

Though Jean-Pierre's work was always grounded in specifics, it resonates beyond the case studies he considered. Its representative quality was and is rooted in metaphor and allusion rather than in the tidy procedures of positivist social science. Of course, Jean-Pierre could abstract, systematize, and engage with the empirical in a conventional, proceduralized, way. His analysis of a corpus of a week's prime-time programming on Radio-Canada and Télé-Metropole, which forms the basis for *La télévision en vrac*, and that of the month's television news

on the same channels, which he and Phillippe Sohet undertook in 1978, testify to that. He resisted positivist social science not for its empiricism but for its abstraction and its consequential distancing of the researcher, the witness, from the world. His heart lay elsewhere: in the discovery and exegesis of the spurned and in the elaboration of witty, allusive, metaphorical essays that provided (and continue to provide) the reader with both pleasure and enlightenment. These aspects of his work are most eloquent in his book *De la famille Plouffe à la petite vie : Les québécois et leurs téléromans*, to accompany the exhibition on the *téléroman* at the Musée de la civilisation at Québec.

All Jean-Pierre's published works testify to his insistence on attending to the world in which people concretely live their lives and, consequentially, to his commitment to communicating beyond the academic bubble. For him, it was more important, more socially productive and generous, to be a public intellectual than to play the academic game of grant getting, abstract and arcane system building, and the writing of big books sometimes seldom read. Desaulniers' irritation with the institutional framework of the university peeks out of his prose from time to time. Doubtless, it peeked out of his daily practice at work more frequently and may have made him an uncomfortable colleague. As he biliously commented in a great little essay, "La plaque 'J'aime ma femme' ou le scandale du bonheur ordinaire" (1982e), the rich texture of rooted and lived cultural practices "n'interesse guère les universitaires." And, to turn the knife further, continued, "Plus rapidement que les universitaires, les publicistes ont compris le phénomène" (1982e, p. 148). These are not comfortable sentiments to issue from a colleague's mouth or pen. But they testify to real qualities: a desire to tell it how it is (or seems); to seek out the best and learn from it wherever it is to be found; and, above all, to remain engaged with the world as it is lived and experienced outside the academy in order to bring the academy into contact with that world.

Note

1. See the blog at: URL: <http://zeroconde.blogspot.com/2005/08/dcs-du-professeur-jean-pierre.html> [February 21, 2006].

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