Jean Baudrillard’s photography: Ultimate Paradox

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Selected Texts
Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), French sociologist, cultural critic, and theorist of postmodernity, was born in the northern town of Reims on the 27th of July 1929. The son of civil servants and the grandson of peasant farmers, he was the first in his family to attend university—eventually becoming a teacher of sociology at the Université de Paris X Nanterre and a leading intellectual figure of his time. Much of his early life and work was influenced by the French occupation of Algeria and the ensuing struggle for independence in the 1950s and 60s.

Before completing his doctoral thesis in sociology under the direction of Henri Lefebvre, Baudrillard taught German at several lycées in Paris and outside the city. Upon the successful completion of his dissertation in September 1966, he took a position in Nanterre—first as Maître Assistant (Assistant Professor), then Maître de Conférences (Associate Professor)—eventually becoming a professor after completing his habilitation with L’Autre par lui-même (The Other by Himself). He was associated with Roland Barthes, to whom his first book, a semiotic analysis of culture—Le système des objets (The System of Objects), 1968—is clearly indebted. In it, he offers a cultural critique of the commodity in consumer society. Baudrillard classifies the everyday objects of the 'new technical order' as functional, nonfunctional and metafunctional. He contrasts 'modern' and 'traditional' functional objects, subjecting home furnishing and interior design to a celebrated semiological analysis. His treatment of nonfunctional or 'marginal' objects focuses on antiques and the psychology of collecting, while the metafunctional category extends to the useless, the aberrant and even the 'schizofunctional.' Finally, Baudrillard deals at length with the implications of credit and advertising for the commodification of everyday life. And what this system does is to transfer—exchange—meaning itself through the continual circulation of objects; thus, it is not just that use-value no longer matters but that what is exchanged is no longer the surplus of production but consumption itself—where the consumer (there are no longer even individuals) not only maintains the illusion of their personal meanings through this exchange but the illusion of use-value itself.
Another major intellectual influence to Jean Baudrillard was Marshall McLuhan, who demonstrated the importance of the mass media in any sociological overview. In 1968, inspired by the student revolt at Nanterre University, he collaborated with the ultra-leftist collective *Utopie* and published a number of theoretical articles on the ambience of capitalist affluence and the critique of technology in their eponymous journal which was helmed by Hubert Tonka. Other influences include Marcel Mauss, Georges Bataille, as well as Jean-Paul Sartre, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, the Situationists, and Surrealism. Less overt, but certainly a significant background influence on his thought, was Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis, while a far more obvious influence on his overall thought was Marxism.

However, Baudrillard’s eventual—perhaps inevitable—break with Marx came in 1972 with *Pour une critique de l’économie politique du signe* (For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign) and *Le Miroir de la production* (The Mirror of Production) in 1973. Rifting with—and stretching the line between Saussure’s signifier and signified—Baudrillard announced the rupture between the sign and its referent; where there is not only no necessary correspondence between the sign and an object in the world, but more radically that the sign takes precedence over reality, that the sign itself is reality. Thus, a deconstructed semiotics, rather than finding in semiotics the objective root of a sociological situation, as with the structuralists.

Baudrillard’s disenchantment with sociology, or more specifically the discipline of sociology, is most apparent in *À l’ombre des majorités silencieuses* (In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, 1982), where he argues that sociology is not analyzing society as much as writing ‘society’ itself into being so as to justify its own existence. For, the old structures of class have vanished into what he describes as the void of the masses: “that spongy referent, that opaque but equally translucent reality, that nothingness: the masses.” The masses no longer make themselves evident as a class (a category which has lost its force because of a proliferation of possible identities), as they have been swamped by so much meaning they have lost all meaning. They have been so continuously analyzed through statistics, opinion polls and marketing that they do not respond to enlightened political representation. And their revenge, as it were, was to have absorbed all the old, modern categories that were once a potentially liberating force. By being everything that you want them to be, the masses have seduced the very notion of society itself into nothingness: for when, “everything is sexual ... everything is political ... everything is aesthetic ... all at once ... each category is generalized to the greatest possible extent, so that it eventually loses all specificity and is reabsorbed by all other categories.”
Faced with this fundamental unknowability that is the masses, all analysis becomes futile. Thus, instead of the traditional approach of slowing down with careful attention to minuciae, Baudrillard attempts to think—to perhaps even write—a tale of the masses at a fast pace in his 1986 text *Amérique* (America). Adopting the genre and form of a travelogue, the text travels through America at high speed, not allowing enough time to become bogged down by the ‘depth’ of American social reality. This is “pure traveling:” where the point is not to write a sociology of the car, or even America; the point is to drive. In this way, one learns more about this society than all academia could ever reveal. Since America is a desert, a vast cultural void where the real and the unreal are merged so completely that distinctions between them disappear, and people's whole lives are played out as if part of a film or soap opera, by approaching a screen as a screen—instead of trying to find what lies behind—and by making oneself a screen, ‘America,’ whatever that might even mean, might just display, and expose, itself. To be sure, Baudrillard is not making a moral judgment about contemporary culture; despite appearances to the contrary he does not intend to condemn it. For, we should try not to forget that “the moral law can do nothing against the rules of the game and the order of evil, which takes its revenge come what may. Everything turns around. And the virtual completion of the world, the perfect crime, the fantastic attempt to bring into being an integral world—that phantasm of total information paradoxically allows us to glimpse an even more fundamental form: that of its radical incompleteness.”

And perhaps, since the law cannot do anything against this phantasm, Baudrillard throws away the proverbial badge and "turns detective" in his 1995 text, *Le Crime parfait* (The Perfect Crime), where he ‘Investigate[s] a crime which he hopes may yet be solved: the ‘murder’ of reality. To solve the crime would be to unravel the social and technological processes by which reality has quite simply vanished under the deadly glare of mediated ‘real time.’ But Baudrillard is not merely intending to lament the disappearance of the real, an occurrence he ... described as ‘the most important event of modern history,’ nor even to meditate upon the paradoxes of reality and illusion, truth and its masks. *The Perfect Crime* is also ... a penetrating examination of vital aspects of the social, political and cultural life of the ‘advanced democracies’ in the (very) late twentieth century. Where critics like McLuhan once exposed the alienating consequences of ‘the medium,’ Baudrillard lays bare the depredatory effects of an oppressive transparency on our social lives, of a relentless positivity on our critical faculties, and of a withering ‘high definition’ on our very sense of reality."
Throughout his œuvre, Jean Baudrillard’s thought hinges—or perhaps even hovers—around the twin notions of ‘hyperreality’ and ‘simulation’: attempts to respond to the virtuality of contemporary culture in an age of mass communication and mass consumption. In a world dominated by simulated experiences and feelings, we experience prepared realities in edited war footage, meaningless acts of terrorism, the destruction of cultural values and the substitution of ‘referendum.’ In Baudrillard’s words, “the very definition of the real has become: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction.... The real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: that is the hyperreal... which is entirely in simulation.” Here, one could possibly conceive of Baudrillard’s work as having passed through three phases—shifts of strategy, tenor, and emphasis rather than content—from the post-Marxist (1968-71), to the socio-linguistic (1972-77), to the techno-prophetic. He has become best known as a prophet of the implosion of meaning that attends the postmodern condition.

However, such categories run the risk of, not only over-simplification, but of going against the very spirit of Baudrillard’s thought. One should not forget that Jean Baudrillard is a thinker who not only builds on the thoughts of others, but creates a break-through, a rupture, not by generating an analysis (nothing so banal) nor theory (even worse), but by seducing the discourse, notion, idea, itself. For “everywhere one seeks to produce meaning, to make the world signify, to render it visible. We are not, however, in danger of lacking meaning; quite the contrary, we are gorged with meaning and it is killing us.” Thus, instead of making meaning where there is none, which would be the futile attempt to combat power with power, influence through influence, Baudrillard reminds us that it is seduction that potentially disrupts: “every discourse is threatened with this sudden reversibility, absorbed into its own signs without a trace of meaning.” And it is “seduction and femininity [that are] ineluctable as the reverse side of sex, meaning, and power ... for seduction continues to haunt them from without, and from deep within its forsaken state, threatening them with collapse.”

Jean Baudrillard taught at The European Graduate School / EGS from its earliest period until his death on March 6, 2007. Even though he has left us, his teachings remain—and his spirit lives—always with us.
The Piracy of Art

Sylvère Lotringer

When Jean Baudrillard, the world-renowned French theorist, first published “The Conspiracy of Art” in 1996, he scandalized the international artistic community by declaring that contemporary art had no more reason to exist. Baudrillard was no art aficionado, but he was no stranger to art either. In 1983, after the publication in English of his ground-breaking essay, Simulations,¹ he was adopted by the New York art world and put on the mast of Artforum, the influential international art magazine. The book instantly became a must-read for any self-respecting artist -- they suddenly were becoming legions -- and it was quoted everywhere, even included in several artist installations. Eventually it made its way -- full-frame -- into the cult Hollywood SciFi film The Matrix. (Baudrillard is Neo). The prestigious lecture he gave on Andy Warhol at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1987 was booked months in advance. For a while artists fought around his name, jockeying for recognition. So it isn’t surprising that his sudden outburst against art would have raised such an uproar. There was a widespread sense of betrayal among art practitioners, as if he had broken an implicit contract. “The denunciation came as a slap in the face,”² a Canadian critic wrote, adding that it was “a radical delegitimization of his own position as a cultural critic.” Baudrillard, of course, never claimed to be one. Like the Situationists, he has a healthy disrespect for “culture.”

True, he didn’t mince his words. Art was “confiscating banality, waste and mediocrity to turn them into values and ideologies,” he wrote, adding that contemporary art wasn’t just insignificant, but null. Null isn’t exactly a term of endearment -- obsolete, worthless, without merit or effect, the dictionary says. Baudrillard seemed to have gone out of his way to provoke the art world, and he certainly got what he asked. It was all the more remarkable that another violent libel he published the following year, “A Conjuration of Imbeciles” (the French political establishment, which let Le Pen hijack the democratic system) elicited no reaction. Politicians apparently are used to this kind of treatment.
So there is something special about the art world after all -- it could do with a lot more abuse.

But could abuse really make a difference? Some critics or curators in the marches of Empire took the attack at face value and crossed him from their list, but people in the know simply basked in the frisson of a well-publicized “scandal.” It doesn’t matter what is said about art as long one pays attention to it. No sooner had Baudrillard’s column been published in the French leftist newspaper Liberation in May 1996, and instantly beamed all over the place through the internet, Baudrillard was deluged with invitations for art events, lectures, catalogue essays. It was obvious that visibility and fame, not contents, were the real engine of the New Art Order. Its power and glamour managed to entice, subdue and integrate any potential threat. Criticizing art, in fact, has become the royal way to an art career and this will be no exception.

It was exactly the point Baudrillard was making in The Conspiracy of Art, and this reaction confirmed what he had already anticipated twenty-five years earlier in The Consumer Society: critique has become a mirage of critique, a counter-discourse immanent to consumption, the way Pop Art’s “cool smile” was no different from commercial complicity. Two years later, in For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, he went even further, asserting that contemporary art had an ambiguous status, half-way between a terrorist critique and a de facto cultural integration. Art, he concluded, was “the art of collusion.” By now this collusion is affecting society at large and there is no more reason to consider art apart from the rest. Obstacles and oppositions, in reality, are used by the system everywhere in order to bounce ahead. Art in the process has lost most of its singularity and unpredictability. There is no place anymore for accidents or unforeseen surprises, writes Chris Kraus in Videogreen. “The life of the artist matters very little. What life?” Art now offers career benefits, rewarding investments, glorified consumer products, just like any other corporation. And everything else is becoming art. Roland Barthes used to say that in America sex was everywhere, except in sex. Now art is everywhere, even in art.

In Simulations, Baudrillard suggested that Disneyland’s only function was to conceal the fact that the entire country was a huge theme park. Similarly art has become a front, a showcase, a deterrence machine meant to hide the fact that the whole society
is transaestheticized. Art has definitely lost its privilege. By the same token it can be found everywhere. The end of the aesthetic principle signaled not its disappearance, but its perfusion throughout the social body. It is well-known that Surrealism eventually spread his slippery games thin through fashion, advertisement and the media, eventually turning the consumer’s unconscious into kitsch. Now art is free as well to morph everywhere, into politics (the aestheticization of politics isn’t a sign of fascism anymore, nor is the politicization of aesthetics a sign of radicalism for that matter), into the economy, into the media. All the more reason for art to claim a dubious privilege in the face of its absolute commodification. Art is enclosing itself in a big bubble, ostensibly protected from consumer contagion. But consumption has spread inside, like a disease, and you can tell by everybody’s rosy cheeks and febrile gestures. The bubble is quickly growing out of proportion. Soon it will reach its limit, achieving the perfection of its form -- and burst with a pop like bubble-gum, or the 90s stock market.

A self-taught sociologist in the 60s, Baudrillard remained intellectually close to the French Situationists and shared their unconditional distrust of “culture.” Ironically, on its way to complete surrender in the late 80s and 90s, the art world made a huge effort to reclaim its virginity by enlisting the Situationists’ radicalism to its cause. It was a curious intellectual exercise, and I saw it unfolding at the time with some glee: the art world reappropriating avant-gardism long after proclaiming the “end of the avant-garde.” The way it was done was even more interesting: showcasing the Situationists’ involvement with architecture and their ideological critique the better to evacuate their unequivocal condemnation of art and art criticism. “Nothing is more exhilarating than to see an entire generation of repentant politicians and intellectuals,” Baudrillard wrote, “becoming fully paid-up members of the conspiracy of imbeciles.” A rt isn’t even the only one to conspire.

“Get out, art critics, partial imbeciles, critics of bit parts, you have nothing more to say,” the Situationists threw at “the art of the spectacle.” They also violently expelled from their midst any artist tempted to participate in the bourgeois comedy of creation. By this account, Guy Debord and his acolytes would have to fire everybody in the present art world, whatever their professed ideology. Granted, it is difficult to be more paranoiac than Debord was. And yet he was absolutely right. There was a conspiracy of art, even if he had to hallucinate it. Now duplicity is transparent. Who today could boast having
any integrity? Debord was ahead of his time and we would actually benefit from having him among us today, but not emasculated. Actually we would be incapable of recognizing him if he did. Was Baudrillard’s exasperated outburst so different from what the Situationists themselves would have done? Art, he wrote, “is mediocrity squared. It claims to be bad - ‘I am bad! I am bad!’ - and it truly is bad.” Baudrillard was wrong in one count. It is worse.

The Conspiracy of Art signaled the “return of the repressed” among the art world. It was displaced, of course, but symptoms always are. And it was unmistakable. Yet no one -- especially those heavily invested in Freud -- recognized it for what it was: Baudrillard was simply repaying the art world in its own coin. The real scandal was not that he would have attacked art, but that art would have found this attack scandalous. Unlike the Situationists, Baudrillard never believed it possible to maintain a distance within the society of spectacle. But his provocation was perfect pitch and totally in keeping with the Situationists’ attempt to reclaim their subjectivity through calculated drifts. Except that Baudrillard’s solitary drift into provocation was neither deliberate, nor existential. It was just a purge.

Baudrillard always had a knack for bringing out the most revealing features in a volatile situation. The year 1987 happened to be a real turning point for the New York art world, throngs of young artists flooding the art market desperately seeking Cesar, a “master thinker,” a guru, anything really to peg their career on. They took Simulations for an aesthetic statement (it was an anthropological diagnostic) and rushed to make it a template for their still inform art. Baudrillard protested, nonplussed by their sudden adulation. “Simulation,” for him, is not a thing. It is nothing in itself. It only means that there isn’t any more original in contemporary culture, only replicas of replicas. “Simulation,” he retorted, “couldn't be represented or serve as a model for an artwork.” If anything, it is a challenge to art. The rush turned into a rout, everybody scattering around with their tails between their legs. Ten years later, Baudrillard did it again. The Conspiracy of Art took on not just the commercialization of art fueled by the return to painting and the real-estate boom, but its global projection through neo-liberal deregulation and the delirious speculations of a stock-market just about to go bust. It wasn’t the naivety of art anymore that Baudrillard blasted, but the cynical exploitation of “art” for non-artistic purposes.
Returning from a brief pilgrimage to the Venice Biennale, Baudrillard exploded. Too much art was too much! Immediately upping the ante, he claimed the existence of a “conspiracy” which didn’t exactly exist in the flesh, but was all the truer for that. Besides, who can resist a bit of conspiracy theory? The pamphlet was mostly an “abreaction,” an acting-out meant to free his own system from all the bad energy. An earnest French artist took the cue and claimed in Liberation that Baudrillard was “feeding paranoia toward contemporary art.” She was absolutely right too. Who could doubt that contemporary art today is besieged by a hostile audience and badly in need of reinforcement? Aren’t artists and dealers, curators, critics, collectors, sponsors, speculators, not to mention socialites, snobs, spongers, crooks, parasites of all kinds, all feeding off art crumbs, heroically sacrificing themselves to redeem art from shoddy consumerism, just like Russian “liquidators” putting down the sarcophagus on the Chernobyl reactor at the cost of their lives? It wasn’t enough that art would have become a huge business, a mammoth multinational corporation with its professional shows, channels and conventions, it still had to be treated with utter reverence, even awe. The controversy was briskly moving to pataphysical heights.

Baudrillard probably had his doubts about contemporary art even before he saw any of it, and he mostly managed to keep away from any serious involvement. To this day he prefers “strange attractors,” borderline objects or projects (Sophie Calle’s vacant drifts through sentiment, the strange cruelty of Michal Rovner’s biological theater), art that doesn’t claim to be art or mean anything, more anthropological than aesthetic in outlook. In a sense Baudrillard himself is a strange attractor (cruelty included), a borderline thinker doing to philosophy or sociology what these strange “things” do to art, all UFO’s coming from different galaxies, each endowed with rigorous rules that cannot be transgressed, even by themselves. Gilles Deleuze once superbly said that he wanted to exit philosophy to engage art, literature, film, but as a philosopher. Unlike him, Baudrillard never had to make a huge effort to get out of philosophy. He never belonged there in the first place, or anywhere for that matter. And he entered art not as a philosopher, but as a traitor, in Deleuze’s sense, inventing his own itinerary. He just went to the other side, becoming a practicing artist of sorts, imperturbably showing in galleries photographs that he didn’t really believe in. And then becoming a traitor to art again by refusing to own up to it.
Baudrillard’s rejection of art was all the more unexpected, and appeared all the more outrageous for that to those who believed he had crossed over. And yet he didn’t seem to notice the contradiction. The episode of the “simulationist school” (and of the “anti-simulationist” controversy) may have had something to do with it. In 1987 Baudrillard didn’t yet know much about the American art world and didn’t quite realize what was happening around his name. At best, he told me later, he sensed that “there was something fishy there” [Je me suis méfié] with a sound peasant-like distrust of sleek city talkers. So he flatly refused to play into the artists’ hands. He might as well have acceded their demand, the way he subsequently accepted the gallerists’ offer to exhibit his photographs because it would eventually have amounted to the same. What could anything one does ever be wrong coming “after the orgy”? If art ceased to matter as art, then what prevented anyone from joining in? Actually that he, who admittedly had no artistic claim or pedigree, would be invited to exhibit his work, amply proved his point: there was nothing special anymore about art. Groucho Marx once said that he would never join a club that accepted him as a member. Baudrillard did worse: he joined a group whose reasons to exist he publicly denied.

“Pataphysician at twenty - situationist at thirty - utopian at forty - viral and metaleptic at sixty - the entire story,” ¹⁷ is the way Baudrillard once epitomized his own itinerary. Pataphysics was founded by Alfred Jarry, creator of Ubu, the brat-king with a paunch. It is the science of imaginary solutions, and this is precisely what Baudrillard reinvented in the circumstance. A pataphysical solution to a problem that didn’t exist. Because he certainly had no problem with it. Others may have, but it was their problem and it wasn’t up to him to solve it. Attacking art and becoming an artist all at the same time was perfectly acceptable in his book. He hadn’t asked to show his photographs, merely obliged. As far as he knew, they may have been trying to bribe him publicly, some kind of “sting operation” by the art squad. But they always implicate you in one way or another, so at least it was all above board. It was part of the “conspiracy” of art. Baudrillard didn’t have to feel any qualms about it, could even enjoy the ride for what it was worth. Early on he learned from French anthropologist Marcel Mauss that “gifts” always come with a vengeance. He knew he would eventually have to reciprocate, squaring the circle. And he did: he wrote The Conspiracy of Art.
Baudrillard is a special kind of philosopher, especially in a country where ideologies come cheap and easy -- what he does is no different from what he writes. He performs his philosophy, not just preaches it. He is a practicing artist of his own concepts. This is an art he never betrayed, his only claim to artistry. Exhibiting his photographs was part of his work as a pataphysician, as much as attacking art was part of his work as a Situationist. That people would be angered at him for these gestures simply proved that they didn't have a clue. They hadn't understood anything about his theory, or about the world we live in for that matter. For Baudrillard the actual photographs are beside the point. It is what precedes them that counts in his eyes -- the mental event of taking a picture -- and this could never be documented, let alone exhibited. But what could be more gratifying than having fully paid-up members of the conspiracy exhibit something that he himself doesn't consider art? The products themselves will go the way of all things artistic - in the garbage or in a gallery. The Museum of Modern Art is considering acquiring his photographs for its collection. The Whitney Museum of American Art is thinking it too, and it would be just fair. What artist today is more modern and American than Baudrillard? The desert too is real.

Proclaiming that art is null was not an aesthetic judgment on his part, but an anthropological problem. It was a polemic gesture towards culture as a whole, which now is simultaneously nothing and everything, being at once elitist and crassly materialistic, repetitive, ingenious, pretentious and inflated beyond human recognition. For Baudrillard art has nothing to do with art as it is usually understood. It remains a yet unresolved issue for post-humans to deal with -- if anyone in the far-away future still cares organizing another exciting panel on the future of art.

Art doesn't come from a natural impulse, but from calculated artifice (at the dawn of modernism, Baudelaire already figured this out). So it is always possible to question its status, and even its existence. We have grown so accustomed to take art with a sense of awe that we cannot look at it anymore with dispassionate eyes, let alone question its legitimacy. This is what Baudrillard had in mind, and few people realized it at the time. First one has to nullify art in order to look at it for what it is. And this is precisely what Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol respectively did. By now art may well have outgrown this function, although everyone keeps acting as if it still mattered. Actually nothing proves that it was meant to persevere, or would persist in the forms it has given
itself, except by some kind of tacit agreement on everybody's part. Baudrillard called it a "conspiracy," but he might as well have called Disneyland "the Conspiracy of Reality." And none of it, of course, was real, except as a conspiracy. Conspiracy too is calculated artifice. Maybe the art world is an art onto itself, possibly the only one left. Waiting to be given its final form by someone like Baudrillard. Capital, the ultimate art. We all are artists on this account.

Art is no different anymore from anything else. This doesn’t prevent it from growing exponentially. The “end of art,” so often trumpeted, never happened. It was replaced instead by unrestrained proliferation and cultural overproduction. Never has art been more successful than it is today – but is it still art? Like material goods, art is endlessly recycling itself to meet the demands of the market. Worse yet: the less pertinent art has become as art, the louder it keeps claiming its “exceptionalism.” Instead of bravely acknowledging its own obsolescence and questioning its own status, it is basking in its own self-importance. The only legitimate reason art would have to exist nowadays would be to reinvent itself as art. But this may be asking too much. It may not be capable of doing that, because it has been doing everything it could to prove it still is art. In that sense Baudrillard may well be one of the last people who really cares about art.

Baudrillard is notoriously “cool” and it may come as a big surprise that he would have got genuinely excited after viewing a major retrospective of Andy Warhol’s work. Didn’t Baudelaire say that a dandy should never lapse from indifference, at most keep a “latent fire”? What Baudrillard so readily embraced in Warhol, though, was not the great artist, but the machine he masterfully managed to turn himself into. Both in his art and in his frozen persona, Warhol embodied in an extreme form the only radical alternative still conceivable in the century: renouncing art altogether and turning commodity itself into an art form. It mattered little that the work eventually got re-commodified as art, and that Warhol himself somehow betrayed his own machinic impulse. Can one ever expect capital to leave anything unchallenged?

The same thing happened earlier on with the invention of the readymade. The idea of exhibiting a “fountain” (a public urinal) in a gallery was totally unprecedented and it sent reality itself reeling. Duchamp probably meant merely shaking the art institution, in
dada fashion, but it was art itself that was the casualty, precipitating the collapse of art history, including his own stunt with painting. There was no more reason to wonder if art should be realistic, expressionistic, impressionistic, futuristic, if it had to paint the light or bring out the scaffolding. It was all in the mind. Non-retinian art was an oxymoron, an explosive device. Something like Nietzsche's laughter. It was a challenge to "culture," meaning the business of art. Reality itself everywhere was up for sale, so why not in a gallery? The readymade wasn't a point of departure, but a point of no return. Once added up, art and reality amounted to a sum zero equation. It was null. Opening the floodgates of art to the decodification of capital, Duchamp left nothing behind.

Could art survive such an abrupt deterritorialization? Apparently yes, but over Duchamp's dead body. Morphing banality into art, Duchamp hadn't fathered a new artistic era, instead he left art intestate, a bachelor machine with nothing more to grind except itself. But this was enough to turn his iconoclastic gesture into a new art paradigm. One can always reterritorialize everything on nothing, This is what the "conspiracy" of art really was about, "striving for nullity when already null and void," as Baudrillard put it. This nullity triggered the great rush of 20th century art, stripping the bride bare, hastily throwing along the way everything that could still justify its own existence as art, gradually exhausting its own resources as a rocket exhausts its fuel to stay on orbit. Filling the gap between reality and art didn't give either of them a new boost, as everyone hoped it would, rather cancelled out any possibility for creative illusion. What was left was an endless recycling of art's own demise, deconstruction and self-reference replacing a more secret kind of singularity, or the reinvention of more inflexible rules. Andy Warhol managed to complete this anorexic cycle by replacing art itself with mechanical reproduction, by the same token returning banality to its irremediable enigma. Anything that came after that was bound to merely retrivialize banality, eagerly affixing finality to an end already gone out of sight. Going nowhere art came to nothing – and everything -- simply staying there, grinding its teeth, losing its bite, then losing the point of it all. It is now floating in some kind of vapid, all consuming euphoria traversed by painful spurts of lucidity, sleep-walking in its sleep, not yet dead, hardly alive, but still thriving.

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Mal-estar na Cultura / Abril-Novembro de 2010
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www.malestarnacultura.ufrgs.br

2 Corinna Ghaznavi and Felix Stalder, “Baudrillard: Contemporary Art is Worthless,” in LOLA, Toronto. It didn’t help much, of course, that they relied on a faulty translation, or simply misread his argument. Baudrillard’s claim that anyone criticizing contemporary art (as he does) is being dismissed as a “reactionary… even fascist mode of thinking” is turned around and presented as an attack on art. Cf. “A Conjunction of Imbeciles,” *infra* in this volume.


5 Chris Kraus, *Videogreen: Los Angeles, or the Triumph of Nothingness*. New York: Semiotext(e), 2004, p. 17.


*Photography is our exorcism. Primitive society had its masks, bourgeois society its mirrors. We have our images.*

-Jean Baudrillard: *Photographies 1985-1998*
The miracle of photography, of its so-called objective image, is that it reveals a radically non-objective world. It is a paradox that the lack of objectivity of the world is disclosed by the photographic lens (objectif). Analysis and reproduction (ressemblance) are of no help in solving this problem. The technique of photography takes us beyond the replica into the domain of the trompe l’oeil. Through its unrealistic play of visual techniques, its slicing of reality, its immobility, its silence, and its phenomenological reduction of movements, photography affirms itself as both the purest and the most artificial exposition of the image.

At the same time, photography transforms the very notion of technique. Technique becomes an opportunity for a double play: it amplifies the concept of illusion and the visual forms. A complicity between the technical device and the world is established. The power of objects and of "objective" techniques converge. The photographic act consists of entering this space of intimate complicity, not to master it, but to play along with it and to demonstrate that nothing has been decided yet (rendre evidente l’idée que les jeux ne sont pas faits). "What cannot be said must be kept silent." But what cannot be said can also be kept silent through a display of images.

The idea is to resist noise, speech, rumours by mobilizing photography's silence; to resist movements, flows, and speed by using its immobility; to resist the explosion of communication and information by brandishing its secrecy; and to resist the moral imperative of meaning by deploying its absence of signification. What above all must be challenged is the automatic overflow of images, their endless succession, which obliterates not only the mark of photography (le trait), the poignant detail of the object (its punctum), but also the very moment of the photo, immediately passed, irreversible, hence always nostalgic. The instantaneity of photography is not to be confused with the simultaneity of real time. The flow of pictures produced and erased in real time is indifferent to the third dimension of the photographic moment. Visual flows only know change. The image is no longer given the time to become an image. To be an image, there has to be a moment of becoming which can only happen when the rowdy proceedings of the world are suspended and dismissed for good. The idea, then, is to replace the triumphant epiphany of meaning with a silent apophany of objects and their appearances.

Against meaning and its aesthetic, the subversive function of the image is to discover literality in the object (the photographic image, itself an expression of literality, becomes the magical operator of reality's disappearance). In a sense, the photographic image materially translates the absence of reality which "is so obvious and so easily accepted because we already have the feeling that nothing is real" (Borges). Such a phenomenology of reality's absence is usually impossible to achieve. Classically, the subject outshines the object. The subject is an excessively blinding source of light. Thus, the literal function of the image has to be ignored to the benefit of ideology, aesthetics, politics, and of the need to make connections with other images. Most images speak, tell stories; their noise cannot be turned down. They obliterate the silent signification of their objects. We must get rid of everything that interferes with and covers up the manifestation of silent evidence. Photography helps us filter the impact of the subject. It facilitates the deployment of the objects's own magic (black or otherwise).

Photography also enables a technical perfection of the gaze (through the lens) which can protect the object from aesthetic transfiguration. The photographic gaze has a sort of nonchalance which non-intrusively captures the apparition of objects. It does not seek to probe or analyze reality. Instead, the photographic gaze is "literally" applied on the surface of things to illustrate their apparition as fragments. It is a very brief revelation, immediately followed by the disappearance of the objects.

But no matter which photographic technique is used, there is always one thing, and one thing only, that remains: the light. Photography: The writing of light. The light of photography remains proper to the image. Photographic light is not "realistic" or "natural." It is not artificial either. Rather, this light is the very imagination of the image, its own thought. It does not emanate from one single source, but from two different, dual ones: the object and the gaze. "The image stands at the junction of a light which comes from the object and another which comes from the gaze" (Plato).

This is exactly the kind of light we find in Edward Hopper's work. His light is raw, white, ocean-like,
reminiscent of sea shores. Yet, at the same time, it is unreal, emptied out, without atmosphere, as if it came from another shore (venue d'un autre littoral). It is an irradiating light which preserves the power of black and white contrasts, even when colors are used. The characters, their faces, the landscapes are projected into a light that is not theirs. They are violently illuminated from outside, like strange objects, and by a light which announces the imminence of an unexpected event. They are isolated in an aura which is both extremely fluid and distinctly cruel. It is an absolute light, literally photographic, which demands that one does not look at it but, instead, that one closes one's eyes on the internal night it contains. There is in Hopper's work a luminous intuition similar to that found in Vermeer's painting. But the secret of Vermeer's light is its intimacy whereas, in Hopper, the light reveals a ruthless exteriority, a brilliant materiality of objects and of their immediate fulfillment, a revelation through emptiness.

This raw phenomenology of the photographic image is a bit like negative theology. It is "apophatic," as we used to call the practice of proving God's existence by focusing on what he wasn't rather than on what he was. The same thing happens with our knowledge of the world and its objects. The idea is to reveal such a knowledge in its emptiness, by default (en creux) rather than in an open confrontation (in any case impossible). In photography, it is the writing of light which serves as the medium for this elision of meaning and this quasi-experimental revelation (in theoretical works, it is language which functions as the thought's symbolic filter).

In addition to such an apophatic approach to things (through their emptiness), photography is also a drama, a dramatic move to action (passage a l'acte), which is a way of seizing the world by "acting it out." Photography exorcizes the world through the instantaneous fiction of its representation (not by its representation directly; representation is always a play with reality). The photographic image is not a representation; it is a fiction. Through photography, it is perhaps the world itself that starts to act (qui passe a l'acte) and imposes its fiction. Photography brings the world into action (acts out the world, is the world's act) and the world steps into the photographic act (acts out photography, is photography's act). This creates a material complicity between us and the world since the world is never anything more than a continuous move to action (a continuous acting out).

In photography, we see nothing. Only the lens "sees" things. But the lens is hidden. It is not the Other which catches the photographer's eye, but rather what's left of the Other when the photographer is absent (quand lui n'est pas la). We are never in the real presence of the object. Between reality and its image, there is an impossible exchange. At best, one finds a figurative correlation between reality and the image. "Pure" reality -- if there can be such a thing -- is a question without an answer. Photography also questions "pure reality." It asks questions to the Other. But it does not expect an answer. Thus, in his short-story "The Adventure of a Photographer," Italo Calvino writes: "To catch Bice in the street when she didn't not know he was watching her, to keep her in the range of hidden lenses, to photograph her not only without letting himself be seen but without seeing her, to surprise her as if she was in the absence of his gaze, of any gaze...It was an invisible Bice that he wanted to possess, a Bice absolutely alone, a Bice whose presence presupposed the absence of him and everyone else." Later, Calvino's photographer only takes pictures of the studio walls by which she once stood. But Bice has completely disappeared. And the photographer too has disappeared. We always speak in terms of the disappearance of the object in photography. It once was; it no longer is. There is indeed a symbolic murder that is part of the photographic act. But it is not simply the murder of the object. On the other side of the lens, the subject too is made to disappear. Each snapshot simultaneously ends the real presence of the object and the presence of the subject. In this act of reciprocal disappearance, we also find a transfusion between object and subject. It is not always a successful transfusion. To succeed, one condition must be met. The Other -- the object -- must survive this disappearance to create a "poetic situation of transfer" or a "transfer of poetic situation." In such a fatal reciprocity, one perhaps finds the beginning of a solution to the problem of society's so-called "lack of communicability." We may find an answer to the fact that people and things tend to no longer mean anything to each other. This is an anxious situation that we generally try to conjure away by forcing more signification.

But there are only a few images that can escape this desire of forced signification. There are only a
few images that are not forced to provide meaning, or have to go through the filter of a specific idea, whatever that idea might be (but, in particular, the ideas of information and testimony are salient). A moral anthropology has already intervened. The idea of man has already interfered. This is why contemporary photography (and not only photo-journalism) is used to take pictures of "real victims," "real dead people," and "real destitutes" who are thus abandoned to documentary evidence and imaginary compassion.8 Most contemporary photos only reflect the "objective" misery of the human condition. One can no longer find a primitive tribe without the necessary presence of some anthropologist. Similarly, one can no longer find a homeless individual surrounded by garbage without the necessary presence of some photographer who will have to "immortalize" this scene on film. In fact, misery and violence affect us far less when they are readily signified and openly made visible. This is the principle of imaginary experience (la loi de l'imaginaire). The image must touch us directly, impose on us its peculiar illusion, speak to us with its original language in order for us to be affected by its content. To operate a transfer of affect into reality, there has to be a definite (resolution) counter-transfer of the image.

We deplore the disappearance of the real under the weight of too many images. But let's not forget that the image disappears too because of reality. In fact, the real is far less often sacrificed than the image. The image is robbed of its originality and given away to shameful acts of complicity. Instead of lamenting the relinquishing of the real to superficial images, one would do well to challenge the surrender of the image to the real. The power of the image can only be restored by liberating the image from reality. By giving back to the image its specificity (its "stupidity" according to Rosset), the real itself can rediscover its true image.

So-called "realist" photography does not capture the "what is." Instead, it is preoccupied with what should not be, like the reality of suffering for example. It prefers to take pictures not of what is but of what should not be from a moral or humanitarian perspective. Meanwhile, it still makes good aesthetic, commercial and clearly immoral use of everyday misery. These photos are not the witness of reality. They are the witness of the total denial of the image from now on designed to represent what refuses to be seen. The image is turned into the accomplice of those who choose to rape the real (viol du reel). The desperate search for the image often gives rise to an unfortunate result. Instead of freeing the real from its reality principle, it locks up the real inside this principle. What we are left with is a constant infusion of "realist" images to which only "retro-images" respond. Every time we are being photographed, we spontaneously take a mental position on the photographer's lens just as his lens takes a position on us. Even the most savage of tribesmen has learned how to spontaneously strike a pose. Everybody knows how to strike a pose within a vast field of imaginary reconciliation.

But the photographic event resides in the confrontation between the object and the lens (l'objectif), and in the violence that this confrontation provokes. The photographic act is a duel. It is a dare launched at the object and a dare of the object in return. Everything that ignores this confrontation is left to find refuge in the creation of new photographic techniques or in photography's aesthetics. These are easier solutions.

One may dream of a heroic age of photography when it still was a black box (a camera obscura) and not the transparent and interactive space that it has become. Remember those 1940s farmers from Arkansas whom Mike Disfarmer shot. They were all humble, conscientiously and ceremonially standing in front of the camera. The camera did not try to understand them or even catch them by surprise. There was no desire to capture what's "natural" about them or "what they look like as photographed."10 They are what they are. They do not smile. They do not complain. The image does not complain. They are, so to speak, caught in their simplest attire (dans leur plus simple appareil), for a fleeting moment, that of photography. They are absent from their lives and their miseries. They are elevated from their miseries to the tragic, impersonal figuration of their destiny. The image is revealed for what it is: it exalts what it sees as pure evidence, without interference, consensus, and adornment. It reveals what is neither moral nor "objective," but instead remains unintelligible about us. It exposes what is not up to reality but is, rather, reality's evil share (malin genie) (whether it is a fortunate one or not). It displays what is inhuman in us and does not signify.
In any case, the object is never anything more than an imaginary line. The world is an object that is both imminent and ungraspable. How far is the world? How does one obtain a clearer focus point? Is photography a mirror which briefly captures this imaginary line of the world? Or is it man who, blinded by the enlarged reflection of his own consciousness, falsifies visual perspectives and blurs the accuracy of the world? Is it like the rearview mirrors of American cars which distort visual perspectives but give you a nice warning
- "objects in this mirror may be closer than they appear"? 11 But, in fact, aren't these objects farther than they appear? Does the photographic image bring us closer to a so-called "real world" which is in fact infinitely distant? Or does this image keep the world at a distance by creating an artificial depth perception which protects us from the imminent presence of the objects and from their virtual danger?

What is at stake (at play, en jeu) is the place of reality, the question of its degree. It is perhaps not a surprise that photography developed as a technological medium in the industrial age, when reality started to disappear. It is even perhaps the disappearance of reality that triggered this technical form. Reality found a way to mutate into an image. This puts into question our simplistic explanations about the birth of technology and the advent of the modern world. It is perhaps not technologies and media which have caused our now famous disappearance of reality. On the contrary, it is probable that all our technologies (fatal offsprings that they are) arise from the gradual extinction of reality.

Notes

2. There is here a play on the French word "objectif." "Objectif" means objective (adj.) and visual lens (subs.) at the same time.
3. This term is in English in the original French version.
4. An unsatisfactory translation of "la photo 'passe a l'acte du monde' et le monde 'passe a l'acte photographique'."
5. Capitalized by Baudrillard in the French text.
8. I use the term "real" (in quotation marks) in front of victims, dead people and destitute to render Baudrillard's term "en tant que tels" (which literally means "as such").
10. In English in the French text.
11. In English in the French text.
BAUDRIillard ON TOUR

BY LARISSA MACfARQUHAR

There may never again be a year in Jean Baudrillard’s life quite like 1999. Baudrillard, the French philosopher, is best known for his theory that consumer society forms a kind of code that gives individuals the illusion of choice while in fact entrapping them in a vast web of simulated reality. In 1999, the movie “The Matrix,” which was based on this theory, transformed him from a cult figure into an extremely famous cult figure. But Baudrillard was ambivalent about the film—he declined an invitation to participate in the writing of its sequels—and these days he is still going about his usual French-philosopher business, scandalizing audiences with the grandiloquent sweep of his gnomic pronouncements and his post-Marxian pessimism.

Earlier this month, he gave a reading at the Tilton Gallery, on East Seventy-sixth Street, in order to promote “The Conspiracy of Art,” his new book. The audience was too big for the room—some people had to stand. A tall, Nico-esque blond woman in a shiny white raincoat leaned against the mantelpiece, next to a tall man with chest-length dreadlocks. A middle-aged woman with red-and-purple hair sat nearby. There was a brief opening act: Arto Lindsay, the onetime Lounge Lizard, whose broad forehead, seventies-style eyeglasses, and sturdy teeth seemed precariously supported by his reedy frame, played a thunderous cadenza on a pale-blue electric guitar.

Baudrillard opened his book and began to read in a careful tone. He is a small man with large facial features. He wore a brown jacket and a blue shirt. (Some years ago, he appeared on the stage of Whiskey Pete’s, near Las Vegas, wearing a gold lamé suit with mirrored lapels, and read a poem, “Motel-Suicide,” which he wrote in the nineteen-eighties. But there was no trace of the lamé Baudrillard at the Tilton Gallery.)

“The illusion of desire has been lost in the ambient pornography and contemporary art has lost the desire of illusion,” he began. “‘After the orgies and the liberation of all desires, we have moved into the transsexual, the transparency of sex, with signs and images erasing all its secrets and ambiguity.’”

After he read, Baudrillard expanded on his theme. “We say that Disneyland is not, of course, the sanctuary of the imagination, but Disneyland as hyperreal world masks the fact that all America is hyperreal, all America is Disneyland,” he said. “And the same for art. The art scene is but a scene, or obscene” —he paused for chuckles from the audience.
—“mask for the reality that all the world is trans-aestheticized. We have no more to do with art as such, as an exceptional form. Now the banal reality has become aestheticized, all reality is trans-aestheticized, and that is the very problem. Art was a form, and then it became more and more no more a form but a value, an aesthetic value, and so we come from art to aesthetics—it’s something very, very different. And as art becomes aesthetics it joins with reality, it joins with the banality of reality. Because all reality becomes aesthetical, too, then it’s a total confusion between art and reality, and the result of this confusion is hyperreality. But, in this sense, there is no more radical difference between art and realism. And this is the very end of art. As form.”

Sylvère Lotringer, Baudrillard’s longtime publisher, who was there to interview him, added, “Yes, this is what I was saying when I was quoting Roland Barthes saying that in America sex is everywhere except in sex, and I was adding that art is everywhere but also in art.”

“Even in art,” Baudrillard corrected.

“Even in art, yes. The privilege of art in itself as art in itself has disappeared, so art is not what it thinks it is.”

Many people in the room wished to ask Baudrillard a question. A gray-haired man wearing a denim cap and a green work shirt, an acolyte of the philosopher Bernard Stiegler, wanted to know whether, even if art was no longer art, as such, it might not still function as useful therapy for the wounded narcissism of artists. A middle-aged man in the second row who had been snapping photographs of Baudrillard with a tiny camera raised his hand.

“I don’t know how to ask this question, because it’s so multifaceted,” he said. “You’re Baudrillard, and you were able to fill a room. And what I want to know is: when someone dies, we read an obituary—like Derrida died last year, and is a great loss for all of us. What would you like to be said about you? In other words, who are you? I would like to know how old you are, if you’re married and if you have kids, and since you’ve spent a great deal of time writing a great many books, some of which I could not get through, is there something you want to say that can be summed up?”

“What I am, I don’t know,” Baudrillard said, with a Gallic twinkle in his eye. “I am the simulacrum of myself.”

The audience giggled.

“And how old are you?” the questioner persisted.

“Very young.”
Jean Baudrillard
Simulacra and Simulations

The following is an excerpt from Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1988), pp.166-184.

“The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth--it is the truth which conceals that there is none.
The simulacrum is true.”

Ecclesiastes

If we were able to take as the finest allegory of simulation the Borges tale where the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory (but where, with the decline of the Empire this map becomes frayed and finally ruined, a few shreds still discernible in the deserts - the metaphysical beauty of this ruined abstraction, bearing witness to an imperial pride and rotting like a carcass, returning to the substance of the soil, rather as an aging double ends up being confused with the real thing), this fable would then have come full circle for us, and now has nothing but the discrete charm of second-order simulacra.

Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory - precession of simulacra - it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself.

In fact, even inverted, the fable is useless. Perhaps only the allegory of the Empire remains. For it is with the same imperialism that present-day simulators try to make the real, all the real, coincide with their simulation models. But it is no longer a question of either maps or territory. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference between them that was the abstraction's charm. For it is the difference which forms the poetry of the map and the charm of the territory, the magic of the concept and the charm of the real. This representational imaginary, which both culminates in and is engulfed by the cartographer's mad project of an ideal coextensivity between the map and the territory, disappears with simulation, whose operation is nuclear and genetic, and no longer specular and discursive. With it goes all of metaphysics. No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept; no more imaginary coextensivity: rather, genetic miniaturization is the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models - and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at
all. It is a hyperreal: the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatorial models in a
hyperspace without atmosphere.

In this passage to a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth, the
age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials - worse: by their
artificial resurrection in systems of signs, which are a more ductile material than
meaning, in that they lend themselves to all systems of equivalence, all binary
oppositions and all combinatorial algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of
reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real
for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational
double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the
signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be
produced: this is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of
anticipated resurrection which no longer leaves any chance even in the event of death. A
hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the
real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the
simulated generation of difference.

The divine irreference of images

To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what
one hasn't. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But the matter is more
complicated, since to simulate is not simply to feign: "Someone who feigns an illness can
simply go to bed and pretend he is ill. Someone who simulates an illness produces in
himself some of the symptoms" (Littre). Thus, feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality
principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation
threatens the difference between "true" and "false", between "real" and "imaginary".
Since the simulator produces "true" symptoms, is he or she ill or not? The simulator
cannot be treated objectively either as ill, or as not ill. Psychology and medicine stop at
this point, before a thereafter undiscoverable truth of the illness. For if any symptom can
be "produced," and can no longer be accepted as a fact of nature, then every illness may
be considered as simulatable and simulated, and medicine loses its meaning since it only
knows how to treat "true" illnesses by their objective causes. Psychosomatics evolves in a
dubious way on the edge of the illness principle. As for psychoanalysis, it transfers the
symptom from the organic to the unconscious order: once again, the latter is held to be
real, more real than the former; but why should simulation stop at the portals of the
unconscious? Why couldn't the "work" of the unconscious be "produced" in the same
way as any other symptom in classical medicine? Dreams already are.

The alienist, of course, claims that "for each form of the mental alienation there is a
particular order in the succession of symptoms, of which the simulator is unaware and in
the absence of which the alienist is unlikely to be deceived." This (which dates from
1865) in order to save at all cost the truth principle, and to escape the specter raised by
simulation: namely that truth, reference and objective causes have ceased to exist. What
can medicine do with something which floats on either side of illness, on either side of
health, or with the reduplication of illness in a discourse that is no longer true or false?
What can psychoanalysis do with the reduplication of the discourse of the unconscious in
a discourse of simulation that can never be unmasked, since it isn't false either?²
What can the army do with simulators? Traditionally, following a direct principle of identification, it unmasks and punishes them. Today, it can reform an excellent simulator as though he were equivalent to a "real" homosexual, heart-case or lunatic. Even military psychology retreats from the Cartesian clarifies and hesitates to draw the distinction between true and false, between the "produced" symptom and the authentic symptom. "If he acts crazy so well, then he must be mad." Nor is it mistaken: in the sense that all lunatics are simulators, and this lack of distinction is the worst form of subversion. Against it, classical reason armed itself with all its categories. But it is this today which again outflanks them, submerging the truth principle.

Outside of medicine and the army, favored terrains of simulation, the affair goes back to religion and the simulacrum of divinity: "I forbade any simulacrum in the temples because the divinity that breathes life into nature cannot be represented." Indeed it can. But what becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme authority, simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or is it volatilized into simulacra which alone deploy their pomp and power of fascination - the visible machinery of icons being substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God? This is precisely what was feared by the Iconoclasts, whose millennial quarrel is still with us today. Their rage to destroy images rose precisely because they sensed this omnipotence of simulacra, this facility they have of erasing God from the consciousnesses of people, and the overwhelming, destructive truth which they suggest: that ultimately there has never been any God; that only simulacra exist; indeed that God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum. Had they been able to believe that images only occulted or masked the Platonic idea of God, there would have been no reason to destroy them. One can live with the idea of a distorted truth. But their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the images concealed nothing at all, and that in fact they were not images, such as the original model would have made them, but actually perfect simulacra forever radiant with their own fascination. But this death of the divine referential has to be exorcised at all cost.

It can be seen that the iconoclasts, who are often accused of despising and denying images, were in fact the ones who accorded them their actual worth, unlike the iconolaters, who saw in them only reflections and were content to venerate God at one remove. But the converse can also be said, namely that the iconolaters possessed the most modern and adventurous minds, since, underneath the idea of the apparition of God in the mirror of images, they already enacted his death and his disappearance in the epiphany of his representations (which they perhaps knew no longer represented anything, and that they were purely a game, but that this was precisely the greatest game - knowing also that it is dangerous to unmask images, since they disimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them).

This was the approach of the Jesuits, who based their politics on the virtual disappearance of God and on the worldly and spectacular manipulation of consciences - the evanescence
of God in the epiphany of power - the end of transcendence, which no longer serves as alibi for a strategy completely free of influences and signs. Behind the baroque of images hides the grey eminence of politics.

Thus perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images: murderers of the real; murderers of their own model as the Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity. To this murderous capacity is opposed the dialectical capacity of representations as a visible and intelligible mediation of the real. All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange. God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless; it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference.

So it is with simulation, insofar as it is opposed to representation. Representation starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent (even if this equivalence is Utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Conversely, simulation starts from the Utopia of this principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum.

These would be the successive phases of the image:

1. It is the reflection of a basic reality.
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality.
3. It masks the absence of a basic reality.
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

In the first case, the image is a good appearance: the representation is of the order of sacrament. In the second, it is an evil appearance: of the order of malefice. In the third, it plays at being an appearance: it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation.

The transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer any God to recognize his own, nor any last judgement to separate truth from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance.
When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production. This is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us: a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal, whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence.

Hyperreal and imaginary

Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation. To begin with it is a play of illusions and phantasms: pirates, the frontier, future world, etc. This imaginary world is supposed to be what makes the operation successful. But, what draws the crowds is undoubtedly much more the social microcosm, the miniaturized and religious revelling in real America, in its delights and drawbacks. You park outside, queue up inside, and are totally abandoned at the exit. In this imaginary world the only phantasmagoria is in the inherent warmth and affection of the crowd, and in that sufficienty excessive number of gadgets used there to specifically maintain the multitudinous affect. The contrast with the absolute solitude of the parking lot - a veritable concentration camp - is total. Or rather: inside, a whole range of gadgets magnetize the crowd into direct flows; outside, solitude is directed onto a single gadget: the automobile. By an extraordinary coincidence (one that undoubtedly belongs to the peculiar enchantment of this universe), this deep-frozen infantile world happens to have been conceived and realized by a man who is himself now cryogenized; Walt Disney, who awaits his resurrection at minus 180 degrees centigrade.

The objective profile of the United States, then, may be traced throughout Disneyland, even down to the morphology of individuals and the crowd. All its values are exalted here, in miniature and comic-strip form. Embalmed and pactified. Whence the possibility of an ideological analysis of Disneyland (L. Marin does it well in Utopies, jeux d'espaces): digest of the American way of life, panegyric to American values, idealized transposition of a contradictory reality. To be sure. But this conceals something else, and that "ideological" blanket exactly serves to cover over a third-order simulation: Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America, which is Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.
The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. Whence the debility, the infantile degeneration of this imaginary. It ~s meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the "real" world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere, particularly among those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions of their real childishness.

Moreover, Disneyland is not the only one. Enchanted Village, Magic Mountain, Marine World: Los Angeles is encircled by these "imaginary stations" which feed reality, reality-energy, to a town whose mystery is precisely that it is nothing more than a network of endless, unreal circulation: a town of fabulous proportions, but without space or dimensions. As much as electrical and nuclear power stations, as much as film studios, this town, which is nothing more than an immense script and a perpetual motion picture, needs this old imaginary made up of childhood signals and faked phantasms for its sympathetic nervous system.

For the heavenly fire no longer strikes depraved cities, it is rather the lens which cuts through ordinary reality like a laser, putting it to death.

-The Precession of Simulacra, Simulations, 1983
Jean Baudrillard

Selected Writings

Second edition, revised and expanded

Edited and introduced by

Mark Poster

Then, on one of my trips to Japan, I was given a camera, and I began to try it out a bit, taking photographs from the plane on the return journey....

-The Ecstasy of Photograph: Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg. Art and Artefact, 1997

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California
Cool Memories

Male eroticism in advertising is always ridiculous. Those who argue for it as the equivalent of the 'erotic prostitution' of the female body on the public stage have no understanding of the mental play of images. The success of the erotic hallucination of the feminine (even for women) comes from the translucidity of those arses, their perfection as objects of idolatry. Only the feminine lends itself to this hallucination. The masculine is never transparent, it cannot be hallucinated. Once it appears, with its ponderousness, its affectation, the magic of the object is gone. The masculine performs poorly on the stage of illusion: whatever thinks it is a subject is always exposed to ridicule by the play of appearances.

All it can do is disappear.

If we consider the superiority of the human species, the size of its brain, its powers of thinking, language, and organization, we can say this: were there the slightest possibility that another rival or superior species might appear, on earth or elsewhere, man would use every means at his disposal to destroy it. Humans won't tolerate any other species — not even a superhuman one: they see themselves as the climax and culmination of the earthly enterprise, and they keep a vigorous check on any new intrusion in the cosmological process. Now there is no reason why this process should come to a halt with the human species, but, by universalizing itself (though only over a few thousand years) that species has more or less fixed it that an end be put to the occurrence of the world, assuming for itself all the possibilities of further evolution, reserving for itself a monopoly of natural and artificial species.
This is not the ferocity of wild and predatory animal species, for these are part of cycles, and are located within constantly reversible hierarchies: neither their appearance nor their disappearance ever puts an end to the process. Only man invents a hierarchy against which there is no possible appeal, in which he is the keystone. This is a sort of ferocity raised to the second power, a disastrous pretension.

The ferocity of man as a species is reflected in the ferocity of humanism as a way of thinking: his claim to universal transcendence and his intolerance of other types of thought is the very model of a superior racism.

Whilst they are hardly to be seen in real life these days, the most intense passions continue to figure in our dreams. Are these then a reserve of fresh and timeless energy, running beneath the stages of life (and perhaps reaching beyond the mishap that is death)? Or is this freshness not merely the hallucination of a jaded desire? In other words: are there two lines to our lives, the one of a non-biological, immemorial youth, which we experience in dreams, and the other an organic line of life and death, of duration and of remembrance, with which we identify our pale and mortal existence? Could there be two fundamental sequences and no relation between them? Or is the first simply the projection of the second, its hallucinatory discourse, as, deep down, psychoanalysis argues?

I am for the first hypothesis: we have two existences, each of which is wholly original and independent of the other (it is not a case of a psychological splitting). Neither existence can be used to interpret the other — which is why psychoanalysis is futile.

There is certainly some interplay between body and mind. The weaker the body, the more apparent the organic wretchedness or obsolescence of that machine, the freer and the more adventurous one’s thinking becomes. It too partakes of that sort of timeless youth which has nothing whatever to do with being in the prime of life. Thinking lives on neither health nor vitality, but on lucidity and pride, and the decaying of the body stimulates that lucidity and that pride.

There is nothing worse than this obligation to research, to seek out references and documentation that has taken up residence in the realm of thought and which is the mental and obsessional equivalent of hygiene. In the ‘intellectual field’, as it is so aptly called, one has to plough the furrow of the concept. It is true that we no longer have a culture of leisure, in which thought and writing were violent and pleasurable. And our leisure now is no more than the charnel-house where dead time is born.

The anxiety specific to leisure and the Coast. Too many forms of natural beauty artificially brought together. Too many villas, too many flowers. Villeggiatura, nomenclatura: the same struggle. The same artificial privilege, whether it be that of the political bureaucracy or the luxuriance of lifestyle. Nature putrefied by leisure, purged of all barbarity, sickeningly comfortable — one day perhaps this dream climate, this heatwave of luxury will explode into one last forest fire.

The book must break up so as to resemble the ever increasing number of extreme situations. It must break up to resemble the flashes of holograms. It must roll around on itself like the snake on the mountains of the heavens. It must turn all the figures of style on their head. It must fade away as it is being read. It must laugh in its sleep. It must turn in its grave.

If there is a species which is more maltreated than children, then it must be their toys, which they handle in an incredibly off-hand manner (how long will it be before someone starts a society for the protection of battered and maltreated objects?). Toys are thus the end point in that long chain in which all the conditions of despotic high-handedness are in play which enchain beings one to another, from one species to another — from cruel divinities to their sacrificial victims, from masters to slaves, from adults to children, and from children to their objects. This is actually the only strong symbolic chain, the one through which a victim of the whim of a superior power passes it on to an inferior species, the whole process ending with someone taking it out on a powerless simulacrum, like a toy — and beginning no doubt with an all-powerful simulacrum, like the masked divinities which men themselves invent to justify this wretched chain.

The mind’s real power (what else can we call it?) is its ability to distinguish a particular nerve, fibre or infinitesimal articulation of the body and invest or disinvest it at will (a sudden thought produces pain in an unknown muscle, or makes a particular line of the face smile, but not some other). The mind can exert itself upon a particular
fraction of the body which cannot be located anatomically, as it can
on a particular particle of language which cannot be located lingu-
sitically, or a particular fraction of time which cannot be located
chronologically.

We end up doing everything for reasons of mental hygiene. Thinking
out of mental hygiene, to keep in good shape intellectually. Screwing
out of mental hygiene, to keep in good shape sexually. Socializing out
of mental hygiene to keep in good shape operationally. All our activ-
ities are attuned to this hygienic objective. The modern person, con-
demned to obsolescence like a piece of military hardware, must
nonetheless remain in a functioning state. Why? For no reason. For
his mental health. Isn’t the production system just a vast apparatus
that we keep going for the sake of the workers’ mental health?

Beautiful as the sensual panorama of discrimination
Beautiful as the sensual illusion of the orifices of the body
Beautiful as the aesthetic division of the work of households
Beautiful as the succession of phases of the light of day

The proximity of bodies in the dark, the tactile promiscuity of objects,
the confusion of desires in dreams – these are the fundamental qual-
ilities, and they are qualities of the night.

A study of the differential resistance of the skin of the buttocks of
the two sexes to blood pressure – there’s a fine subject for research in a
sterile and functional future.

On the truth of things, three hypotheses:

- That things are as they are makes them true (this is the empirical
  version).
- That they cannot be other than as they are does not prevent them
  from being true (though it is not really clear why: this is the
  confused and paradoxical version).
- That they cannot but be as they are is what prevents them from
  being true. The necessity of being such takes from them the ring of
  truth (this is the negative and subtle version).

The seal of secrecy is a fine metaphor. The secret is in fact that
which is sealed, that which circulates beneath the seal of appearances
and not beneath the sign of communication (not even beneath the
opposite sign of the unsaid and silence). The secret is what has no
need of being said and is therefore the most obvious of things and
shines forth in full daylight, needing no other form of expression.

One way of dying is to make your death alter the state of things in such
a way that you no longer have any reason to be a part of it. Thus death
can have the effect of a prophetic disappearance. Such were the deaths
of Barthes and Lacan, I believe: the world has taken another direction
since, in which these subtle figures would no longer have had any
meaning. The death of Sartre, by contrast, left the world unchanged
and seems an ineluctable, but insignificant event. Before dying, he was
already to live in a world that was no longer his own.

So far as existence is concerned, as Ajar would say, it needs to be
taken in charge by someone. No one can be expected to bear the
responsibility for their own life. This Christian and modern idea is a
vain and arrogant proposition. Moreover, it is a groundless utopian
notion. The individual would have to be able to transform himself
into the vestal, or the slave, of his identity, control all his circuits and
all the circuits of the world which meet in his genes, nerves and
thoughts. An unprecedented state of servitude. Who would wish to
have salvation at such a price?

It is so much more human to put one’s fate, one’s desire, one’s will
into the hands of another. Circulation of responsibilities, declension
of wills, perpetual transfer of forms. Apart from this subtle path,
which is attested to by a great many cultures, there is only the
totalitarian path of a collective assumption.

The old form of voluntary servitude was that of free men using that
freedom paradoxically to turn themselves into serfs. The new volun-
tary servitude is that of men obeying the demand that they be free.

What you look for in travel is neither discovery nor exchange, but a
gentle deterritorialization, being taken in charge by the journey itself,
and therefore by absence. In the metallic vectors which transcend
the meridians, the oceans and the poles, absence takes on a carnal
quality. The secrecy of hiding away in one’s private life gives way to
annihilation by latitude and longitude. But in the end the body
wearies of not knowing where it is, whilst the mind is excited by that
absence, as if by a lively, subtle quality that is its own. The body is
woven of too many ties of blood and flesh. It resists this disfiguring of familiar space in the anamorphosis of travel.

All things considered, what we look for in other people is perhaps the same gentle deterritorialization we look for in travel. The temptation of exile in the desire of another and of journey across that desire come to be substituted for one’s own desire and for discovery. Often looks and amorous gestures already have the distance of exile, language expatriates itself into words which are afraid to mean, the body is like a hologram, gentle on the eyes and soft to the touch, and can thus easily be striated in all directions by desire like an aerial space. We move circumspectly within our emotions, passing from one to another, on a mental planet made up of convolutions. And we bring back the same transparent memories from our excesses and passions as we do from our travels.

The more advanced life-simulation technology becomes, the more the question of the soul intervenes, perversely, as an accident. Everything becomes transformed into a pure, incessant production of accidents. From the moment we leave the world of substance and come to live in that of accident, perversion becomes normal and constitutive.

She disliked the fact that men would always want to take a woman there-and-then, without delay... One day, she gets her own back. She does not take the lift, but goes up the stairs instead and undresses floor by floor – her sweater, her skirt, her shoes, her watch, finally, just outside the door, her knickers; then she rings the bell. When I open the door she is standing there completely naked, like a dream, with her raincoat over her arm. The most beautiful present she could give me (but also, what artifice there is in immodesty!).

What she did not say was that she wanted to be undressed slowly with all the ceremonials that should go into unveiling a perfect body, which would only finally be penetrated with extreme politeness, almost out of consideration for the difference between the sexes, a delicate seduction which women dream of as intensely as men dream of the opposite.

Right from the start our relationship had gone astray over this divergence. Sometimes she had imposed her dream of sensual attentiveness. This time, she was giving herself to me – far beyond my own wildest dreams. At least she was pretending to. For, renouncing the game of femininity, she it was once again who was overturning the rules.

They say other species have stopped short, and that only the human species, the humanoid branch, has made its definitive breakthrough. In fact while all the others persevered in their specific forms and ended up disappearing genetically, thus leaving evolution to run its course, only the human species succeeded in surpassing itself in the simulacrum of itself – in disappearing genetically to resuscitate artificially. By perpetuating itself in a world of clones and electronic prostheses (perfect in so far as they will have eliminated every potential species, including humanity), man will thus, in a definitive act, have wiped out the natural genesis of things.

Contact with the men who wield power and authority still leaves an intangible sense of repulsion. It’s very much being in close proximity to faecal matter, the faecal embodiment of something unmentionable and you wonder what it is made of and where it acquired its historically sacred character. Why this feeling of loathing for the politician? Is it the impression of being artificially subjected to a will that is even more stupid than your own and which, by its very function, has to be crude? How can the decision-making function be performed without simplifying the mechanisms of thought?

Political charisma is precisely not that gracious charisma which emanates from the irresistible power of a pure object, such as the power of a woman, but an ungracious will which derives its power and its glory from voluntary servitude. This is true of all institutions, the military, the clerical, the medical, and more recently the psychoanalytic, but it is particularly so in politics which remains the most striking hallucination of all the weaknesses of the will.

One may justify the existence of men in power in many different ways. Yet power remains a pernicious thing for what justifies it is inexpiable.

Fragility, which belongs to the realm of appearances, is to be preferred to the fractal which is merely the quality of a mathematical object.

It is exciting to hear one of your fondest ideas formulated in one fell swoop, better than you could have done it yourself. You feel no intellectual jealousy at seeing yourself outstripped in this way. You only feel jealous when you are overtaken by your shadow.
Two bodies side by side, which are not asleep and know it: a strange kind of communication sets in between them, formed of respect for simulated sleep, and yet it needs to betray itself by some furtive sign - a breathing pattern which is not that of real sleep or movements which are not those of a dreaming body. Neither, however, wants to break the spell. It is a conspiracy in the dark, an emotional conspiracy filled with delicious tension.

There has been much discussion of the uninterpretable answer to the question: 'are you lying?' But ask someone next to you, very softly so as not to wake him: 'are you asleep?' If he replies that he is, then that makes him a liar. But he can reply by pretending to be asleep, which is not actually lying, but pretending to lie. There is a big difference, since this is a lovers' game. The question itself is a lovers' game because it assumes the partner is not asleep while making every effort not to wake him. Besides, these are the same questions: do you love me? are you lying to me? are you asleep? And the reply - yes, I love you, yes, I'm lying, yes, I'm asleep - is equally paradoxical. But it is not untruthful. It simply comes from another world which is not the truth of the first. 'Yes, I'm asleep. Yes, I'm lying. Yes, I love you' all these answers reflect a marvellous somnambulism and, all in all, a very clear grasp of the relations we establish with reality when we are sleeping, lying or in love.

NOTE

1 The novelist Romain Gary's alter-ego. [Trans.]
The Conspiracy of Art

Jean Baudrillard

Manifestos, Interviews, Essays

Edited by Sylvère Lotringer
Translated by Ames Hodges

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Marshall McLuhan: “We have now become aware of the possibility of arranging the entire human environment as a work of art.”

The revolutionary idea of contemporary art was that any object, any detail or fragment of the material world could exercise the same strange attraction and ask the same insoluble questions as those formerly reserved for a few rare aristocratic forms called art works.

That was its true democracy, not in allowing everyone access to aesthetic pleasure but in the transaesthetic advent of a world in which each object without distinction would have its fifteen minutes of fame (especially objects without distinction). Everyone is equal, everything is great. The upshot came in the transformation of art and the work itself into an object, without illusion or transcendence, a purely conceptual acting out, generating deconstructed objects that deconstruct us in turn.

No more faces, no glances, no human figures or bodies there—organs without bodies, flows, molecules, fractals. The relationship to the “work” is on the level of contamination or contagion: you plug in, become, absorb, immerse yourself just like in flows or networks. Metonymical linkage, chain reactions.

No more real objects at all: with readymades, the object is no longer there, only the idea of the object. And we no longer take pleasure in art, only in the idea of art. We are deep in ideology.

The readymade holds the double curse of modern and contemporary art: the curse of immersion in reality and banality along with the curse of conceptual absorption in the idea of art.

Saul Bellow on Picasso: “That absurd sculpture by Picasso, with its metal branches and leaves—no wings, no victory, a mere testimony, a vestige—the idea of a work of art, nothing more. Very similar to the other ideas and other vestiges that inspire our lives—no more apples, but the idea, the reconstruction by the appleologist of what an apple once was—no ice cream, but the idea, the memory of a delicious thing now made of substitutes, starch, glucose and other chemical products—no more sex, but the idea or suggestion of sex—the same for love, belief, thought and everything else....”

Art, in its form, signifies nothing. It is only a sign of absence.

Yes, but what becomes of this perspective of emptiness and absence in a contemporary universe that has already been totally emptied of meaning and reality?

Art can only ally itself with general insignificance and indifference. It no longer has any privileges. It has no final destination other than the fluid universe of communication, networks and interaction.

Speakers and receivers are all combined in the same mix: everyone a speaker, everyone a receiver. Each subject interacts with him—or herself, destined to express him—or herself without having the time to listen to others.

The Net and networks obviously increase this possibility of utterances for oneself, in a closed circuit, with each person engaging in his or her virtual performance and contributing to the general suffocation.
The desire to take photographs may perhaps arise from the following observation: looked at in general, from the angle of meaning, the world is distinctly disappointing. In detail, taken unawares, it is always perfectly self-evident.


Recovering Radical Illusion

Is there still an aesthetic illusion? And if not, a path to an "aesthetic" illusion, the radical illusion of secret, seduction and magic? Is there still, on the edges of hypervisibility, of virtuality, room for an image? Room for an enigma? Room for a power of illusion, a veritable strategy of forms and appearances?

Against all modern superstitions of "liberation," it must be said that forms are not free, figures are not free. They are on the contrary bound: the only way to liberate them is to chain them together, in other words to find their links, the ties that create and bind them, that chain them gently together. Moreover, they connect and engender themselves, and art has to enter into the intimacy of this process. "It is better for you to have enslaved one free man with kindness than to have freed a thousand slaves" (Omar Khayyam).7

Objects whose secret is not their expression, their representative form, but on the contrary their condensation and their subsequent dispersion in the cycle of metamorphoses. In fact, there are two ways to escape the trap of representation: by never-ending deconstruction, where painting never ceases to watch itself die in the
shards of the mirror, even if it scrapes something together with the remains, it is always interdependent on the lost signification, always wanting a reflection or a story. Or by simply leaving representation behind, forgetting any concern for reading, interpretation, decoding, forgetting the critical violence of meaning and mistake, returning to the womb of the appearance of things where they merely state their presence, albeit in multiple forms, multiplied by the specter of metamorphoses.

Entering the specter of the dispersion of the object, the womb of the distribution of forms is the very form of illusion, of the return to play (illudere). Going beyond an idea means negating it. Going beyond a form means passing from one form to another. The first defines the critical intellectual position that is often the position of modern painting in its contact with the world. The second describes the principle of illusion where there is no other fate for form than form. In this sense, we need illusionists who know that art, and painting, are illusions, in other words as far from intellectual criticism of the world as from aesthetics proper (which presupposes a reflective discrimination between the beautiful and the ugly), who know that art is first of all a trompe l’oeil, a “trompe life,” just as any theory is a “trompe meaning” and all painting, far from being an expressive, and therefore supposedly true, version of the world, consists in creating snares in which the presumed reality of the world is naïve enough to get caught. Just as theory does not consist in having ideas (and therefore of flirting with truth), but in setting snares, traps in which meaning is naïve enough to get caught. Finding, through illusion, a form of fundamental seduction.

It is a delicate command not to succumb to the nostalgic charms of painting, and to remain on the subtle line that is closer to the lure than aesthetics, inheriting a ritual tradition that has never really mixed with the tradition of painting: the tradition of trompe l’oeil. A dimension that, beyond the aesthetic illusion, reconnects with a much more fundamental form of illusion that I would call “anthropological”—to designate the generic function of the world and its emergence, whereby the world appears well before being interpreted or represented, well before becoming real, which it only became lately, and no doubt fleetingly. Not the negative and superstitious illusion of another world, but the positive illusion of this world, of the operatic stage of the world, of the symbolic operation of the world, of the vital illusion of appearances that Nietzsche spoke of—illusion as a primitive scene, long before and much more fundamental than the aesthetic scene.

The realm of artifacts reaches largely beyond the realm of art. The reign of art and aesthetics is a conventional management of illusion, a convention that neutralizes the wild effects of illusion, that neutralizes illusion as an extreme phenomenon. The aesthetic is a sort of sublimation or mastery through form of the radical illusion of a world that would otherwise destroy us. Other cultures accepted the cruel evidence of this original illusion of the world by establishing an artificial balance. Our modern cultures no longer believe in this illusion of the world but rather in its reality (which is of course the final illusion) and we have decided to temper the ravages of illusion through this cultivated, docile form of simulacrum known as the aesthetic form.

Illusion has no history. Aesthetic form does. But because it has a history, it also only has one time and we are no doubt now witnessing the disappearance of this conditional form, of this aesthetic form of the simulacrum in favor of an unconditional simulacrum, in other words a certain primitive scene of illusion where we return to the inhuman rituals and phantasmagoria of the cultures preceding our own.
Pataphysics

Ubu, the gaseous and lampooned state, the small intestine and the grandeur of emptiness. Seeing that everything may be stucco, or a knock-off, even a wooden tree—and that powerful sham that makes the dough of phenomena rise—nothing stops this katabasis towards the knock-off and the blah from starting well before the form now taken by so-called true objects—and that everything was before being born, in its cancerous and imaginary state—can only be born in the cancerous and imaginary state—which does not prevent things from being less false that you think, in other words...

Pataphysics is the greatest temptation of the mind. The horror of ridicule and necessity leads to the enormous infatuation, the enormous flatulence of Ubu.

The pataphysic mind is the nail in the tire—the world, a puffball. The paunch is at one and the same time a hot air balloon, a nebula, or even the perfect sphere of knowledge. The intestinal sphere of the sun. There is nothing to get from death. Can a tire die? It releases its rubber soul. Farting is the source of breath.

The principle is to exaggerate: that is how to destroy reality. In Ubu's arrogance, willpower, importance, faith and all things are
raised to their paroxysm where one can naturally see that they are
made of the same wind that makes farts, the same meat made into
grease and ash, the same bone made into fake ivory and fake galax-
ies. This is not ridicule. It is inflation, the abrupt passage into an
empty space that is no one's thought—for there is no pataphysic
thought, there is only the pataphysic acid that sours and embalms
life like milk, that boils it like a drowned body and bursts it like
the greenish truffle of the Palotins' brains.

Pataphysics: philosophy of the gaseous state. It can only define
itself as a new, undiscovered language because it is too obvious: taut-
ology. Even better: it can only be explained by its own term, thus:
it does not exist. It revolves around itself and ruminates the diarr-
heic incongruence, unsmilingly, mushrooms and rotting dreams.

The rules of the pataphysical game are far worse than any
other. It is a deadly narcissism, a mortal eccentricity. The world is
an inane protuberance, an empty jerk-off, a kitsch and papier-
mâché delirium, but Artaud, who thinks the same way, believes
that from this member brandished for nothing could one day
emerge a real sperm, that the theater of cruelty could come from a
carcatural existence, in other words a real virulence. Whereas
Pataphysics no longer believes in either sex or theater. The façade
is there and nothing behind it. The ventriloquacity of the hood-
winked (the bladders and lanterns)³ is absolute. Everything is born
infatuated, imaginary, an edema, a fiddler crab, a dirigé. There is
not even a way to be born or to die. That is reserved for stone,
meat, and blood, for things with weight. In Pataphysics, all phe-
nomena are absolutely gaseous. Even recognition of this state,
even the awareness of the fart, the itch and the coitus for naught
is not serious... and the awareness of this awareness, etc. Aimless,
soulless, without phrases and imaginary, albeit necessary, the pat-
aphysic paradox is simply to burst. Artaud, pushed to the edge by
the renewed emptiness before and around him, did not commit
suicide because he believed in some incarnation, a birth, a sexual-
ity, a drama. All on the stage of cruelty, since reality could not
receive them. There were stakes to be won and Artaud's hope was
immense. The confines of the bladder had the scent of a Chinese
lantern. Ubu blew out all the lanterns with his fat fart. And, more-
ever, he was convincing. He convinced everyone of nothingness
and constipation. He proved that we are an intestinal complic-
ourselves to prove it? Certainly, since it isn't serious. But what if that were how it was serious... Finally, to exalt Pataphysics, better to be an unconscious pataphysician—and we all are. Humor wants humor about humor, etc. Pataphysics is science...

Artaud is the perfect foil. Artaud wants to renew the value of creation and of birth. He tears an image, like Soutine tears one from his rotting beef, not an idea. He believes that by piercing this abscess of sorcery, a lot of pus will flow, but in the end, good god, some real blood will come and when the whole world is heaving like Soutine's beef, the playwright will be able to start over with our bones for a grand, serious festival where there are no more spectators. In contrast, Pataphysics is bloodless and avoids getting wet. It moves around in its parodic universe like the absorption of the mind into itself without a trace of blood. And in the same way: every pataphysic process is a vicious circle in which panic-stricken forms, to their surprise, eat each other up like crabs in the reeds, digesting each other like stucco buddhas and from every angle only give off the fecal sound of pumice and dried boredom.

Because Pataphysics reaches such a level of perfection in play and because it gives so little importance to everything, it has so little itself. In it, all the solemn nullities, all the figures of nullity fail and turn to stone before the gorgon eye of Ubu. In it, every thing becomes artificial, venomous, a path to schizophrenia, with pink stucco angels whose extremities meet in a curved mirror... Loyola—the world can be rotten, as long as I reign. If a soul does not resist the printed curves, the spirals and vortexes, caught at the moment of climactic tartuffery, then it is delivered to the sumptuous Ubu, whose smile returns every thing to its sulfurous uselessness and its latrine freshness... Such is the sole imaginary solution to the absence of problems.
Chapter 6
'photos are very beautiful, but you mustn't say so . . .'

Philippe Petit: Reading your writings on photography, one has the feeling you are replaying the passionate nineteenth-century quarrel on the art of photography. I'm thinking of a comment by Ingres: 'Photos are very beautiful, but you mustn't say so . . .', and of Walter Benjamin saying that you couldn't reflect on photography 'without first wondering whether the very invention of photography had not overturned the fundamental character of art completely'. You seem to adopt that approach as your own. It isn't so much photography you reject, but photography's becoming image, like art becoming gallery art, as we have already discussed. That's what put me in mind of Ingres's comment.

Jean Baudrillard: It's true that there is in photography a secret to be preserved. I speak of this as an untutored, intermittent user and practitioner. What I regret is the aestheticization of photography, and that this type of image has become one of the fine arts, and fallen into the abyss of culture. The photographic image came, by its technical essence, from a region before or beyond aesthetics, and by that token it constitutes a considerable revolution in our mode of representation. The irruption of photography throws art itself into question in its aesthetic monopoly of the image. Now, it is art which has swallowed up photography rather than the other way round (it has paid the price for this, since it has gradually emptied itself of its substance). Photography comes from elsewhere, and must remain there. It is part of
another, timeless tradition which is not, properly speaking, aesthetic, and which is the tradition of trompe-l’œil that runs right through the history of art, but does so indifferent to its twists and turns. Trompe-l’œil is linked to the self-evidence of the world, and to such a minutely detailed resemblance that it’s only apparently realistic (it is, in fact, magical). It preserves the magical status of the image, whereas art lapses into aesthetics, following a progression which leads from the sacred to the beautiful, then to generalized aesthetics. Now, the anthropological power of the image stands opposed to well-tempered representation and to any realist vision – it retains something of the radical illusion of the world.

It is, therefore, an instinctive [sauvage] form, irreducible to the aestheticization of things, linked to their appearance, their self-evidence – but to a deceptive self-evidence. It runs quite contrary to the twofold goal that’s been foisted upon it: realism or aestheticism. For me, a photographic image is still valid today not so much in terms of quality or content as in terms of pure fascination. It’s closer to the origin and the torments of representation. By dint of the non-realist play with technique, and by its definitive excision, its absolute stillness, its silence, its phenomenological reduction of colour and movement, it is the purest and most artificial image. It isn’t beautiful, it’s worse. And it’s as such that it assumes the force of an object in a world in which precisely the aesthetic principle is petering out. And so I’ve got caught up in the game of this fetishistic immanence of the object, and this convergence between an objective technique and the very potency of the object. The photographic operation is a sort of reflex, a sort of automatic writing of the self-evidence of the world – a self-evidence which is really nothing of the kind.

**PP:** For you, photography is a primitive art, a savage art. You say: ‘All the other forms of image, far from being advances, are perhaps only attenuated forms of this break between the pure image and the real.’ It’s no accident either if, later in this same text on primitiveness and the stupefaction which arises out of the photographic art, the only literary references you make are to Gombrowicz and Nabokov.

**JB:** It’s because they represent something which goes beyond the dimension of
literature, aesthetics and any well-tempered culture. I would say the same of Bacon in the field of art. The powerful works are those which no longer play-act art, aesthetics and culture. In the field of thought, they are those which no longer play-act ideas, interpretation and meaning.

To get back to photography: it’s technics which gives the photo its extraordinary character as image. It’s through this technicity that our world reveals itself to be radically non-objective. It is, paradoxically, the objective lens of the camera which reveals the unobjectivity of the world, that little something which will not be resolved by analysis or in resemblance. By its technique, it carries us beyond resemblance, to the heart of the illusion of reality. In so doing, it also transforms the vision we have of technics. We’re taken here beyond the moral or philosophical rejection of ‘alienating’ technics to a perspective on it as the strategic site of a double game, as the magnifying mirror of illusion and forms. From that perspective, the question becomes: do we think the world or does the world think us? Through photography, it’s the object which is looking at us, thinking us. At least, that’s how it would be if photography hadn’t been reduced to the level of an aesthetic practice.

**PP:** That puts me in mind of the relationship between man and machine as conceived by Simondon, who made a distinction between technics and technology. Denigrators of technics today often confuse technics with technology. What Simondon called technical culture and technical individuals is the possibility we find in Marey and others of a strong exchange between man and machine. The machine is first a challenge to man, before it’s an obstacle or a panacea.

**JB:** There’s a duel between technical equipment and the world, and a collusion too (the one implies the other). Photography (but not just photography, of course) might be said to be the art of slipping into that collusion – not to control the process, but to play with it and show that the die is not irrevocably cast. Is this true of technics as a whole? At any rate, it’s the way to turn around the conventional view of it.
PP: Photography is the objectal; it's the object looking at us rather than the subject looking. How do you move from this technical view of photography to this para-aesthetic view?

JB: I don't appeal to an inverted, object-based aesthetics. I'm not saying the object has taken control. Turning things round here means making the object, on which the subject's presence and representation are imposed, the site of the absence and disappearance of the subject; so, it means making the object emerge as an indissoluble self-evidence. The photographic 'object' may, in fact, be a situation, a quality of light or a living creature. The key thing is that it should take on the force of a pure event or object and, to do that, the subject has to have withdrawn from it. Somewhere in this over-perfectly designed machinery of representation, there has to be a fracture. The object's priority shatters the scenario of representation (and, of course, all the moral and philosophical dialectics attaching to it). It's an inversion of the mirror. Until now it was the subject which was the mirror of representation; the object was merely the content. This time, it's the object which says 'I shall be your mirror' — that is to say: 'I (We) shall be your favourite disappearing act'. The subject forfeits the monopoly of interpretation. Or, rather, no interpretation is possible any longer. As the object has nothing to say and is without desire, its power, which is that of the unoffering of the world in the raw state, cannot be distilled or negotiated in commentary or interpretation. For the object to be grasped, the subject has to loose his grasp on himself. But this provides the subject with his last adventure, his last chance, the chance to be dispossessed of himself not in traditional alienation, but in the reverberation of a world in which he occupies what is, from now on, the blind place of representation. The object, for its part, has a much greater power of play since, not having passed through the mirror-stage, it doesn't have to deal with its image, its identity or its resemblance. The object scoffs at all these problems in which the subject is bogged down today, as it scoffs at desire (this is also true of the sexual 'object'). If one manages to capture something of this objective dissimilarity and singularity, something of the world changes — not only within the real, but beyond its reality principle.
PART TWO

PP: What you say of the object also goes for the photographed subject. In a passage on the heroic age of photography, you say of the subject that he has the stature of the dead. Well, nowadays, in your view, the nothingness has disappeared from images, from photography. Is this why there's no photographic art any more?

JB: This business about the dead is quite simply the idea that at the heart of the photographic image there's a figure of nothingness, of absence, of unreality. It's this nothingness at the heart of the image which gives it its magic. It's this nothingness which has been expelled in all possible ways, by saturating the photo with all manner of references and significations. Photo-reportage festivals and galleries are chock-full of eyewitness accounts, aesthetic or demagogic sentimentality, stereotypes. It's a positive prostitution of the image to what it signifies, the image taken hostage by its own content. In the profusion of our images, death and violence are everywhere, but a pathos-laden, ideological, spectacular death. By contrast, what Barthes calls the 'punctum', that absent point, that nothingness at the heart of the image which gives it its power, no longer exists. And this seems to me an error, even from the point of view of the message, for no wretchedness or violence in the world impinges on us if we have removed this specificity of the image, this symbolic void which gives it its potency. This is also why it is so difficult to photograph human beings, living beings, because they are themselves so charged with meaning that it's almost impossible to set it aside to find the secret form of their absence.

PP: Can you clarify what you mean by secret otherness here, because many authors have spoken of the secret, from the most psychological – Gide, say – to the least psychological, such as Deleuze? It's sometimes difficult to know what they all mean by this. What do you mean by secret otherness? Is this why you don't like photographers who, when they're doing your portrait, try to put you at ease with small talk?

JB: Yes, because, in a total psychological misconception, they think they're
bringing out your deep identity. Only bad actors identify with their roles. They try to use unsubtle tricks to bring out a truth of the person or the face. Now, to grasp someone in their singularity is to grasp in them what is beyond their own grasp, to grasp the way they escape your grasp. Each person is doubtless present with their will and desire, but, secretly, their decisions and thoughts come to them from elsewhere, and it's in this very strange interaction that their originality lies. It isn't in the mirrors in which they recognize themselves, nor in the lens that's trying to recognize them. The trap is always the trap of resemblance, and what's interesting in the image, when it knows how to preserve its secrecy (and this also goes for cinema and painting), is that it defies all resemblance, that it seeks elsewhere what comes from elsewhere. Something's in play which one has to grasp before it takes on the appearance of determination and meaning. In our lives we rely to a considerable extent on the machinery of will and representation, but the real story goes on elsewhere.

**PP:** Does this non-resemblance connect with what Blanchot called 'cadaverous resemblance'?\(^5\)

**JB:** I don't know. I would speak, rather, of a kind of metapsychology, a metapsychology in which we are never a single individual, in which we are born in the dual state and each of us is haunted by his own twin, the true resolution of the Oedipus complex no longer being the separation from the mother and father, but the separation from the original twin. That double has to be exorcised, conjured away, if one is to be oneself, and perhaps we never truly succeed in this. We're haunted by this phantom twinnness, by this identical reduplication, and we're always under threat of merging into it. This is why otherness from elsewhere, any kind of seduction from elsewhere, frees us from the fateful presence of this phantom twin (this alternative is shown very powerfully in the film *Dead Ringers*). Those who remain attached to it are dead in life—and this we all are after a fashion, caught in the trap of a maleficent identity. Singularity can come only from splitting and a breaking of symmetry.
**PP:** Can one name this phantom twin? Why a double, and not triplets? Why do you stress this theme of the double?

**JB:** We conceive the world of individuation being surpassed only in plurality or multiplicity. That way, we remain in the same accounting register. The one and the more-than-one, the one and the many, the singular and the plural. Now, there’s a fundamental form which is neither unity nor plurality: an original, irreducible form which is duality. It can disappear into multiplicity or dissemination or, conversely, into individuality, that species of artificial totality. But the living, antagonistic form remains the dual form — a specific mode in some languages, but one that has almost disappeared from ours. A primordial relation this, which is not the one multiplied by two, nor the dialectical or interactive mode of the one to the other — a dual form, irreducible to the one and the other, which is there from the outset in a symbolic reciprocity. Life is, of course, a double game for escaping the dual within the individual, but it’s geared, all the same, to the irruption of this secret otherness.

**PP:** If I follow you, your ideal would be for a photographer to capture your phantom twin?

**JB:** For my part, I’ve never found either the twin form or the dual form in the photos of myself that I’ve seen. Who knows? I must have a resistance of the same order as my resistance to psychoanalysis. I’m as difficult to photograph as I am to analyse. Having said this, the human for us is ultimately conflated with the individual. With the duality I’m speaking of we enter, in a sense, upon the inhuman, with all that this implies in terms of fascination and danger. However, some manage to sense this otherness in other people through photography. Sometimes a single detail, an angle, a quality of light, can bring this about. For if, taken all in all, the individual is quite conventional, taken in the detail, in the fragment — it’s the same with the world — he or she is always original.

**PP:** If you can’t name this phantom twin, can you render it poetically?
PAROXYSM

JB: That otherness doesn’t necessarily come from others; it can arise out of a situation, an event, from all kinds of strange seductions and convergences, from anything which breaks this twin symmetry. In the past, other powers, for good or ill, saw to it that we were dissociated from ourselves, whereas now everyone is left to him/herself. Everyone is caught in the trap of him/herself, even in the minutiae of life, in the debris of that now-lost symbolic organization. Everyone is merely the mirror of the other in the broken mirror of alterity.

Through technics, the human world has entered upon the inhuman. When everyone becomes a technical vehicle, an operational vector of the same networks, what was still merely the tragic destiny of twins becomes the curse of clones.

PP: There remains, none the less, an extraordinary specificity of human thought, which perhaps comes down to the fact that it has taken up residence in science as much as in duration, to paraphrase Bergson: science is the distinctive feature of man; it is of the essence of the human. Man is the only being who can build a theory of himself. François Laruelle describes man as a theoretical individual.

JB: The human has been defined for only two or three centuries, and it was defined very intellectually, in terms of reason. Since then, the relation to the world has been through that extremely subtle organ, the brain. In other cultures the relation to the world is a relation of the whole body, caught in the cycle of metamorphoses, and in collusion with the world. Our modern, rational intelligence makes us technical beings from the very start, beings in the image of our tools and knowledge. Now, it seems that today our technologies and sciences go way beyond human intellection. Who knows if they’re not carrying us towards a new relationship, a new set of rules based on radical uncertainty? This implies a kind of sacrifice of the intellect, a sort of brutal interruption in the cycle of the species. There are some fine pages in Saul Bellow on the fact that our civilization now lives in self-hatred – a self-hatred arising out of insuperable remorse at this break with the species. It’s the continuity of the species in us that is being avenged for the fact that we’ve become free, emancipated individuals. We’re still continuing to expiate that
PART TWO

betrayal. Our modernity is defined by the perspective of humanism and the Enlightenment, but what preceded us is far more immense than that humanism, and knew nothing of this distinction between the human and the inhuman. The discovery – or rediscovery – of the inhuman, the violence done to the human in the current field of knowledge, seems to me to be more than an opening, a breach through which to explore the inhuman potentialities of man, and to rediscover – who knows? – a possible metamorphosis of the species, other than its artificial survival in technology.

PP: Do you agree with Susan Sontag’s assertion that ‘Cameras are the antidote and the disease, a means of appropriating reality and a means of making it obsolete’?26

JB: Why not? But all these formulas are reductive, in so far as they always revolve around the real – the problem being to exorcize or appropriate it. Once again, in the generic illusion of the image, for better or for worse the problem of the real no longer arises. It’s left behind in the very movement of the image which, from the outset, passes beyond the true and the false, the real and the unreal. The image isn’t a medium for which we have to find the right use. It is what it is and, as such, it escapes all our moral considerations. It’s immoral in its essence, and the world’s becoming image is an immoral development. It’s up to us to escape our representation, and become ourselves the immoral vectors of the image. It’s up to us to become objects again, to become other again in a relation of seduction with the world.

PP: I’d like to come back to the word ‘primitive’. You say: ‘For objects, savages, beasts, primitives, alterity is certain, singularity is certain; the most insignificant of objects is other, for subjects it is much less certain.’

JB: Savages are not necessarily primitives. What is savage is what is not confronted with its resemblance, with its identity, with the desperate search for that identity. A beast doesn’t have an identity. It’s all the others together, and it’s not itself. For all
that, it's not alienated: it's foreign to itself, foreign to its own meaning, foreign to its own end. Consequently, it has this charm of beings which are foreign to their image, but enjoy an organic familiarity with their bodies and an organic complicity with all the others. If one manages to recover this connivance and this strangeness, one approaches a poetic quality of otherness, a poetry of alterity similar to that of paradoxical sleep (identity being the equivalent of deep sleep).

**PP:** In speaking of the magic of photography, you stress its phenomenal stillness. Isn't this possibility of unparalleled contemplation which photography offers us a quasi-Zen way, in your writing, of breaking with Western transcendence and seeking a more Eastern attitude?

**JB:** I certainly wouldn't say 'Eastern', because I don't want to play on words or references. There's a kind of effect of stupefaction, if not of contemplation, in the image and the photograph. The 'freeze-frame' is in this sense a freezing of the world. The image interrupts the rush of events. This kind of 'suspense' is never definitive, since photos are never there singly, and refer on from one to another (the image has no other destiny than the image), with this kind of stillness and silence in common. This is doubtless why photography has reacquired an extraordinary aura, which it had lost when cinema came along. But cinema also – in the work of Godard, for example – can recover this specific quality of the image: collusive with, but foreign to, narration; static, but harnessing all the energy of movement. In this sense, photographs offer an example of a high degree of condensation, the condensation of a whole course of events in a fixed image, whereas most current images offer the example of great dilution.

**PP:** Ideally, you say, photography should do without commentary, and you don't show much fondness for the institutions which celebrate it. Do you think that kind of institution is a nuisance? Do you think it contributes to diluting the force of the image rather than restoring that force to its full dimensions?

**JB:** The image is offstage, 'out-of-shot', the opposite of staging. The staging of
photographs, whether aesthetic or institutional, their staging in exhibitions and museums, is a nonsense. With official embalming by the museum, and the solemnity of the cult of photography, you get the bizarre impression that that death we were speaking of, the death at the heart of the image, has left it, been expelled from it, and has taken on the outward form of a mausoleum or necropolis. Instead of the image symbolically enclosing death, death closes around the image.

**PP:** On Bacon, who photographed himself in his photo-booth shots, you say the best subjects to photograph themselves are those who have found their obsessive form, their temperamental identity, their narcissistic aspect [figure]. Would you say of the painter Bacon that he succeeded in photographing himself in his photo-booth pictures?

**JB:** I don’t know what place that had in his work. I think one can – and Bacon is the example of this – no longer regard oneself at all as a representative being, but as an obsessive, temperamental being/object, working in one’s own cycle, and not in any sense in a staging of oneself. Bacon went quite a long way in that frenzied self-delimitation. There’s a touch of enchantment in this, which you can also find in acting, in which you go beyond your own image and you are left to a kind of happy fatality. It’s you – and it isn’t you – who are acting at that moment. Some people, by a kind of initiatory confinement, manage to clear the decks both inside and around themselves. Bacon succeeded better than anyone in creating this exceptional, vanitiesless form of a singularity outside the very field of painting. He no longer projects himself into images: through images, it’s himself he produces as event, without commentary. And this distinguishes him from most contemporary artists, who are all too conscious of their place in the history of art.

**PP:** Why don’t you photograph human beings?

**JB:** Because only the inhuman is photogenic. It still shows through in the first photographs, even in humans, when people posed like statues, transfixed by the lens. What interests me is this cry of the object at evening in the depths of the
darkroom. In its specificity [idiotie], every object – light or matter – comes to you as a surprise; it’s no longer a matter of imposing a vision or a style. And the technique may be refined (with me, it isn’t), but in the end it’s always the subject who vanishes behind his lens. But this can be transposed elsewhere. Perhaps the species, by inventing a multiplicity of virtual connections, is finding a way of losing itself in the immensity of the networks. In the technical universe, the real actor is not the one you think he is. The rules of the game are doubtless not what you think they are either.

PP: Why are there fields in which you can anticipate the revenge of forms – writing and photography, for example? And why is politics not one of them?

JB: The political, strictly political, alternative has no future. It was a utopia, or a promise, arising out of industrial modernity and a purposive rationality. Neither that purpose nor that promise exists any longer. Rather, we inhabit the antagonistic dream of a violent solution, not unlike the invasion of the mirror peoples Borges wrote of. The dream of all those who are condemned by the victorious emperor to be shut away behind the mirror, whence they merely reflect the image of their conquerors. They’re already beginning not really to resemble those conquerors any longer; they’re starting to reflect a distorted image, and one day they’ll pass through the mirror again in the opposite direction; they’ll resume the war, and on that occasion, writes Borges, they will not be defeated.

It’s at the cost of a fantastic exclusion, a ‘perfect crime’, that the world is consolidating itself and homogenizing; it’s the victory of the emperor monopolizing everything in his image. Metaphorically, it’s the idea that all that remains on our side is a world that’s material, visible, identifiable, perfectly identified. Yet somewhere else (behind the mirror) there’s a kind of infinite, unidentified dark matter which could one day, one imagines, be our destiny. At any rate, from today on, it is the limit of our understanding of our material world. We run up against this total enigma of an antimatter which haunts the material world, but at the same time gives it its coherence. The world has taken shape only because this breaking
of symmetry occurred, which has definitively unsettled it. Just as, elsewhere, there is the uncanny nature of the feminine, the ironic secret of the community as Hegel saw it, and the one which gives it form. There will be no end to this world because there will always be something of this radical otherness lying in wait for us. But it’s no longer an active, political, rational negativity, grappling with history. It’s the imminence of a revenge, of a resurrection of all that has been exiled to the other side of the mirror and held captive in the servile representation of the world of the victors, the revenge of all who have landed up on the wrong side of the universal. This power – of which we are all a part, even without knowing it – squints out from the other side of the mirror, and its ghost haunts the realized world. The more the world becomes realized, the more active is this radical illusion. This is what I termed the transparence of evil.
AMERICA
Jean Baudrillard
Translated by Chris Turner
(Material Word)
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ASTRAL AMERICA

Astral America. The lyrical nature of pure circulation. As against the melancholy of European analyses. The direct star-blast from vectors and signals, from the vertical and the spatial. As against the fevered distance of the cultural gaze.

Joy in the collapse of metaphor, which here in Europe we merely grieve over. The exhilaration of obscurity, the obscurity of obviousness, the obviousness of power, the power of simulation. As against our disappointed vigilance, our charms of affectation.

Sironation. Star-blasted, horizontally by the car, altitudinally by the plane, electronically by television, geologically by deserts, stereolithically by the megalopolis, transpolitically by the power game, the power museum that America has become for the whole world.

For me there is no truth of America. I ask of the Americans only that they be Americans. I do not ask them to be intelligent, sensible, original. I ask them
only to populate a space incommensurate with my own, to be for me the
highest astral point, the finest orbital space. Why should I go and
decentralize myself in France, in the ethnic and the local, which are merely
the ashes and vestiges of centrality? I want to centre myself, to become
eccentric, but I want to do so in a place that is the centre of the world. And,
in this sense, the latest fast-food outlet, the most banal suburb, the blankest
of giant American cars or the most insignificant cartoon-strip majorities is
more at the centre of the world than any of the cultural manifestations of old
Europe. This is the only country which gives you the opportunity to be so
brutally naïve: things, faces, skies, and deserts are expected to be simply
what they are. This is the land of the ‘just as it is’.

America always gives me a feeling of real asceticism. Culture, politics – and
sexuality too – are seen exclusively in terms of the desert, which here
assumes the status of a primal scene. Everything disappears before that
desert vision. Even the body, by an ensuing effect of undernourishment,
takes on a transparent form, a lightness near to complete disappearance.
Everything around me suffers this same desertification. But this radical
experimentation is the only thing that enables me to get through and
produce that astral quality I have not found anywhere else.

America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality
because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though
it were already achieved. Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is
all the stuff of dreams too: it may be that the Truth of America can only be
seen by a European, since he alone will discover here the perfect simulacrum
– that of the immanence and material transcription of all values. The
Americans, for their part, have no sense of simulation. They are themselves

simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language in which to
describe it, since they themselves are the model. As a result, they are the
ideal material for an analysis of all the possible variants of the modern
world. No more and no less in fact than were primitive societies in their day.
The same mythical and analytic excitement that made us look towards those
earlier societies today impels us to look in the direction of America. With the
same passion and the same prejudices.

In reality, you do not, as I had hoped, get any distance on Europe from here.
You do not acquire a fresh angle on it. When you turn around, it has
quite simply disappeared. The point is that there is really no need to adopt a
critical stance on Europe from here. That is something you can do in Europe.
And what is there to criticize which has not been criticized a thousand times
before? What you have to do is enter the fiction of America, enter America
as fiction. It is, indeed, on this fictive basis that it dominates the world. Even
if every detail of America were insignificant, America is something that is
beyond us all...

America is a giant hologram, in the sense that information concerning the
whole is contained in each of its elements. Take the tiniest little place in the
desert, any old street in a Mid-West town, a parking lot, a Californian house,
a BurgerKing or a Studebaker, and you have the whole of the US - South,
North, East, or West. Holographic also in that it has the coherent light of the
laser, the homogeneity of the single elements scanned by the same beams.
From the visual and plastic viewpoints too: things seem to be made of a
more unreal substance; they seem to turn and move in a void as if by a
specia lighting effect, a fine membrane you pass through without noticing
It. This is obviously true of the desert. It is also the case with Las Vegas and advertising, and even the activities of the people, public relations, and everyday electronics all stand out with the plasticity and simplicity of a beam of light. The hologram is akin to the world of phantasy. It is a three-dimensional dream and you can enter it as you would a dream. Everything depends on the existence of the ray of light bearing the objects. If it is interrupted, all the effects are dispersed, and reality along with it. You do indeed get the impression that America is made up of a fantastic switching between similar elements, and that everything is only held together by a thread of light, a laser beam, scanning out American reality before our eyes. In America the spectral does not refer to phantoms or to dancing ghosts, but to the spectrum into which light disperses.

On the aromatic hillsides of Santa Barbara, the villas are all like funeral homes. Between the gardenias and the eucalyptus trees, among the profusion of plant genus and the monotony of the human species, lies the tragedy of a utopian dream made reality. In the very heartland of wealth and liberation, you always hear the same question: What are you doing after the orgy? What do you do when everything is available — sex, flowers, the stereotypes of life and death? This is America’s problem and, through America, it has become the whole world’s problem.

All dwellings have something of the grave about them, but here the fake serenity is complete. The unspeakable house plants, lurking everywhere like the obsessive fear of death, the picture windows looking like Snow White’s glass coffin, the clumps of pale, dwarf flowers stretched out in patches like scabs, the proliferation of technical gadgetry inside the house, beneath it, around it, like drips in an intensive care ward, the TV, stereo, and video which provide communication with the beyond, the car (or cars) that connect one up to that great shoppers’ funeral parlour, the super-market, and, lastly, the wife and children, as glowing symptoms of success... Everything here testifies to death having found its ideal home.

The microwave, the waste disposal, the orgasmic elasticity of the carpets: this soft, resort-style civilization irresistibly evokes the end of the world. All their activities here have a surreptitious end-of-the-world feel to them: these Californian scholars with monomaniacal passions for things French or Manist, the various sects obsessively concerned with chastity or crime, these joggers sleepwalking in the mist like shadows that have escaped from Plato’s cave, the very real mental defectives or mongols let out of the psychiatric hospitals (this letting loose of the mad into the city seems a sure sign of the end of the world, the loosening of the seals of the Apocalypse), these obese individuals who have escaped from the hormone laboratories of their own bodies, and these drilling platforms — ‘oil sanctuaries’ — keeping watch in the night, like grand casinos, or extraterrestrial spacecraft.

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A M E R I C A

Ravishing hyperrealism
Ecstatic asceticism
Multi-process tracking shot
Interactive multi-dimensionality
Mind-blowing

Western Digitalis
Body Building Incorporated
Mileage unlimited
Channel Zero
Seedy bar in Santa Barbara. The billiard player's red braces. Foucault, Sartre, and Orson Welles all standing together at the counter, talking to each other, strangely convincing, strikingly like the original. 'Cocktail scenery.' The smell of violence, the stale odour of beer. 'Hustling is prohibited.'

Sex, beach, and mountains. Sex and beach, beach and mountains. Mountains and sex. A few concepts. Sex and concepts. 'Just a life.'

Everything is destined to reappear as simulation. Landscapes as photography, women as the sexual scenario, thoughts as writing, terrorism as fashion and the media, events as television. Things seem only to exist by virtue of this strange destiny. You wonder whether the world itself isn't just here to serve as advertising copy in some other world.

When the only physical beauty is created by plastic surgery, the only urban beauty by landscape surgery, the only opinion by opinion poll surgery... and now, with genetic engineering, along comes plastic surgery for the whole human species.

This is a culture which sets up specialized institutes so that people's bodies can come together and touch, and, at the same time, invents pana in which the water does not touch the bottom of the pan, which is made of a substance so homogeneous, dry, and artificial that not a single drop sticks to it, just like those bodies intertwined in 'feeling' and therapeutic love, which do not touch — not even for a moment. This is called interface or interaction. It has replaced face-to-face contact and action. It is also called communication, because these things really do communicate: the miracle is that the pan bottom communicates its heat to the water without touching it, in a sort of remote boiling process, in the same way as one body communicates its fluid, its erotic potential, to another without that other ever being reduced or even disturbed, by a sort of molecular capillary action. The code of separation has worked so well that they have even managed to separate the water from the pan and to make the pan transmitting its heat as a message, or to make one body transmit its desire to the other as a message, as a fluid to be decoded. This is called information and it has wormed its way into everything, like a phobic, material leitmotiv, which affects sexual relations as well as kitchen implements.

Other examples of this mania for asepsis:

The Getty museum where old paintings look new, bleached and gleaming, cleansed of all patina and irruption, with an artificial lustre that echoes the fake Pompeian decor all around them.

In Philadelphia, a radical sect named 'MOVE', with a bizarre set of rules, including one forbidding both the practice of autopsies and the removal of rubbish, is cleared out by the police, who kill eleven people by fire and burn down thirty adjacent houses, including those (the irony of it) of all the neighbours who had called for the sect to be removed.

This, too, is a clean-up operation. They are getting rid of rubbish and patina, getting back to an original state of cleanliness, restoring. 'Keep America clean.' And that smile everyone gives you as they pass, that friendly contraction of the jaws triggered by human warmth. It is the eternal smile of communication, the smile through which the child becomes aware of the presence of others, or struggles desperately with the problem of their presence. It is the equivalent of the primal scream of man alone in the world. Whether I am right in all this or not, they certainly do smile at you here, though neither from courtesy, nor from an effort to charm. This smile signifies only the need to smile. It is a bit like the Cheshire Cat's grin: it continues to float on faces long after all emotion has disappeared. A smile available at any moment, but half-scared to exist, to give itself away. No
ulterior motive lurks behind it, but it keeps you at a distance. It is part of the general cryogenization of emotions. It is, indeed, the smile the dead man will wear to his funeral home, as he clings to a hope of maintaining contact even in the next world. The smile of immunity, the smile of advertising: 'This country is good. I am good. We are the best.' It is also Reagan's smile—the culmination of the self-satisfaction of the entire American nation—which is on the way to becoming the sole principle of government. An autoprophetic smile, like all signs in advertising. Smile and others will smile back. Smile to show how transparent, how candid you are. Smile if you have nothing to say. Most of all, do not hide the fact you have nothing to say nor your total indifference to others. Let this emptiness, this profound indifference shine out spontaneously in your smile. Give your emptiness and indifference to others, light up your face with the zero degree of joy and pleasure, smile, smile, smile... Americans may have no identity, but they do have wonderful teeth.

And it works. With this smile Reagan obtains a much wider consensus than any that could be achieved by Kennedy with mere reason or political intelligence. The recourse to a pure form of compliment, be it animal or infantile, is much more successful and the whole American population comes together in this toothpaste effect. No idea—nor even the nation's moral values in their entirety—could ever have produced such a result. Reagan's credibility is exactly equal to his transparency and the nullity of his smile.

The skateboarder with his walkman, the intellectual working on his word-processor, the Bronx breadsinner whirling frantically in the Roxy, the jogger and the body-builder: everywhere, whether in regard to the body or the mental faculties, you find the same blank solitude, the same narcissistic refraction.

This omnipresent cult of the body is extraordinary. It is the only object on which everyone is made to concentrate, not as a source of pleasure, but as an object of fanatical concern, in the obsessive fear of failure or substandard performance, a sign and an anticipation of death, that death to which no one ever any longer gives a meaning, but which everyone knows has at all times to be prevented. The body is cherished in the perverse certainty of its uselessness, in the total certainty of its non-resurrection. Now, pleasure is an effect of the resurrection of the body, by which it exceeds that hormonal, vascular and dietetic equilibrium in which we seek to imprison it, that exercise by fitness and hygiene. So the body has to be made to forget pleasure as present grace, to forget its possible metamorphosis into other forms of appearance and become dedicated to the utopian preservation of a youth that is, in any case, already lost. For the body which doubts its own existence is already half-dead, and the current semi-sacred, semi-eschatological cult of the body is a morbid preoccupation. The care taken of the body while it is alive prefigures the way it will be made up in the funeral home, where it will be given a smile that is really 'into' death.

This 'into' is the key to everything. The point is not to be nor even to have a body, but to be into your own body. Into your sexuality, into your own desire. Into your own functions, as if they were energy differentials or video screens. The hedonism of the 'into': the body is a scenario and the curious hygienist thoroughly devoted to it runs through the innumerable fitness centres, body-building gyms, stimulation and simulation studios that stretch from Venice to Tujunga Canyon, bearing witness to a collective asexual obsession.

This is echoed by the other obsession: that of being 'into', hooked in to your own brain. What people are contemplating on their word-processor screens is the operation of their own brains. It is not entailed that we try to interpret these days, nor even hearts or facial expressions; it is, quite simply, the brain. We want to expose to view its billions of connections and watch it
operating like a video-game. All this cerebral, electronic snobbery is hugely affected — far from being the sign of a superior knowledge of humanity, it is merely the mark of a simplified theory, since the human being is here reduced to the terminal excrecence of his or her spatial chalice. But we should not worry too much about this: it is all much less scientific, less functional than is ordinarily thought. All that fascinates us is the spectacle of the brain and its workings. What we are wanting here is to see our thoughts unfolding before us — and this itself is a superstition.

Hence, the academic grappling with his computer, ceaselessly correcting, reworking, and complicifying, turning the exercise into a kind of interminable psychoanalysis, memorizing everything in an effort to escape the final outcome, to delay the day of reckoning of death, and that other — fatal — moment of reckoning that is writing, by forming an endless feed-back loop with the machine. This is a marvellous instrument of esoteric magic. In fact all these interactions come down in the end to endless exchanges with a machine. Just look at the child sitting in front of his computer at school: do you think he has been made interactive, opened up to the world? Child and machine have merely been joined together in an integrated circuit. As for the intellectual, he has at last found the equivalent of what the teenager gets from his stereo and his walkman: a spectacular desublimation of thought, his concepts as images on a screen.

In the Romy, the sound-proofed bar dominates the dancefloor the way the screens dominate an air traffic control room or the technicians' gallery towers over a television studio. The club is a fluorescent milieu with spotlighting, strobe effects, dancers swept by beams of light . . . all of these the effects you find on screens. And everyone is aware of this. Today, no staging of bodies, no performance can be without its control screen. This is not there to see or reflect those taking part, with the distance and magic of the mirror. No, it is there as an instantaneous, depthless refraction. Video, everywhere, serves only this end: it is a screen of ecstatic reflection. As such, it has nothing of the traditional image or scene, or of traditional theatricality, and its purpose is not to present action or allow self-contemplation: its goal is to be hooked up to itself. Without this circular hook-up, without this brief, instantaneous network that a brain, an object, an event, or a discourse create by being hooked up to themselves, without this perpetual video, nothing has any meaning today. The mirror phase has given way to the video phase.

This is not narcissism and it is wrong to abuse that term to describe the effect. What develops around the video or stereo culture is not a narcissistic imaginary, but an effect of frantic self-referentiality, a short-circuit which immediately hooks up like with like, and, in so doing, emphasizes their surface intensity and deeper meaninglessness.

This is the special effect of our times. The ecstasy of the polaroid is of the same order: to hold the object and its image almost simultaneously as if the conception of light of ancient physics or metaphysics, in which each object was thought to secrete doubles or negatives of itself that we pick up with our eyes, has become a reality. It is a dream. It is the optical materialization of a magical process. The polaroid photo is a sort of ecstatic membrane that has come away from the real object.

Yes stop a horse that is bolting. You do not stop a jogger who is jogging. Forming at the mouth, his mind riveted on the inner countdown to the moment when he will achieve a higher plane of consciousness, he is not to be stopped. If you stopped him to ask the time, he would bite your head off. He doesn’t have a bit between his teeth, though he may perhaps be carrying
dumb-bells or even weights in his belt (where are the days when girls used to wear bracelets on their ankles?). What the third-century Stylite sought in selfprivation and proud stillness, he is seeking through the muscular exhaustion of his body. He is the brother in mortification of those who conscientiously exhaust themselves in the body-building studios on complicated machines with chrome pulleys and on terrifying medical contraptions. There is a direct line that runs from the medieval instruments of torture, via the industrial movements of production-line work, to the techniques of schooling the body by using mechanical apparatuses. Like dieting, bodybuilding, and so many other things, jogging is a new form of voluntary servitude (it is also a new form of adultery).

Decidedly, joggers are the true Latter Day Saints and the protagonists of an easy-does-it Apocalypse. Nothing evokes the end of the world more than a man running straight ahead on a beach, swathed in the sounds of his walkman, cocooned in the solitary sacrifice of his energy, indifferent even to catastrophes since he expects destruction to come only as the fruit of his own efforts, from exhausting the energy of a body that has in his own eyes become useless. Primitives, when in despair, would commit suicide by swimming out to sea until they could swim no longer. The jogger commits suicide by running up and down the beach. His eyes are wild, saliva drips from his mouth. Do not stop him. He will either hit you or simply carry on dancing around in front of you like a man possessed.

The only comparable distress is that of a man eating alone in the heart of the city. You see people doing that in New York, the human flotsam of conviviality, no longer even concealing themselves to eat leftovers in public. But this still belongs to the world of urban, industrial poverty. The thousands of lone men, each running on their own account, with no thought for others, with a stereophonic fluid in their heads that oozes through into their eyes, that is the world of Blade Runner, the post-catastrophe world. Not to be aware of the natural light of California, nor even of a mountain fire that has been driven ten miles out to sea by the hot wind, and is enveloping the offshoot oil platforms in its smoke, to see nothing of all this and obstinately to carry on running by a sort of lymphatic flagellation till sacrificial exhaustion is reached, that is truly a sign from the beyond. It is like the obese person who keeps on getting fatter, the record rotating endlessly in the same groove, the cells of a tumour proliferating, like everything that has lost the formula for stopping itself. This entire society, including its active, productive part—everyone—is running straight ahead, because they have lost the formula for stopping.

All these track-suits and jogging suits, these loose-fitting shorts and baggy cotton shirts, these 'easy clothes' are actually old bits of nightwear, and all these relaxed walkers and runners have not yet left the night behind. As a result of wearing these billowing clothes, their bodies have come to float in their clothes and they themselves float in their own bodies.

Anorexic culture: a culture of disgust, of expulsion, of anthropophobia, of rejection. Characteristic of a period of obesity, saturation, overabundance. The anorexic populates this culture in rather a poetical fashion by trying to keep it at bay. He refuses lack. He says: I lack nothing, therefore I shall not eat. With the overweight person, it is the opposite: he refuses fullness, repulsion. He says: I lack everything, so I will eat anything at all. The anorexic staves off lack by emptiness, the overweight person staves off fullness by excess. Both are homeopathic final solutions, solutions by exhaustion.

The jogger has yet another solution. In a sense, he spews himself out; he doesn't merely expend his energy in his running, he vomits it. He has to attain the ecstasy of fatigue, the 'high' of mechanical annihilation, just as the anorexic aims for the 'high' of organic annihilation, the ecstasy of the empty
body and the obese individual seeks the high of dimensional annihilation; the ecstasy of the full body.

The latest obsession of American public opinion: the sexual abuse of children. There is now a law that two people must be present when very young children are being handled for fear of unverifiable sexual abuse. At the same time, supermarket carrier bags are adorned with the portraits of missing children.

Protect everything, detect everything, contain everything - obsessional society.

Save time. Save energy. Save money. Save our souls - phobic society.


Curiously, in this world where everything is available in profusion, everything has to be saved and economized. The obsession of a young society, concerned to protect its future? The impression given is rather that of a sense of threat, all the more insidious for being groundless. It is profusion which creates an hallucination of a sort of backfiring into shortage and penury, which has to be averted by homeopathic discipline. There are no other reasons for these starvation rations - collective dieting, ecological control, this mortification of bodies and pleasures. A whole society organized to ward off the vengeance of overfed divinities, suffocated by plenty. Of course our basic problem today is how to avoid becoming overweight.

Compiling inventories of everything, stocking everything, memorizing everything. Hence the elephants enveloped in liquid bitumen, whose bones become fossilized in its black, mineral viscosity, together with the lions, mammoths, and wolves who roamed the plains of Los Angeles and were the first, prehistoric victims of the oil fields. Today they have all received a second embalming at Hancock Park in a museum devoted to the role-learning of prehistory. And, in conformity with the prevailing moral code, all this is presented with conviction. Americans are people of conviction, convinced of everything and seeking to convince. One of the aspects of their good faith is this stubborn determination to reconstitute everything of a past and a history which were not their own and which they have largely destroyed or spirited away. Renaissance castles, fossilized elephants, Indians on reservations, sequoias as holograms, etc.

In storing details on their computers of all the known souls in the civilized (white) countries, the Mormons of Salt Lake City are behaving no differently from other Americans, who all share the same missionary spirit. It is never too late to revive your origins. It is their destiny: since they were not the first to be in on history, they will be the first to immortalize everything by reconstitution (by putting things in museums, they can match in an instant the fossilization process nature took millions of years to complete). But the conceit Americans have of the museum is much wider than our own. To them, everything is worthy of protection, embalming, restoration. Everything can have a second birth, the eternal birth of the simulacrum. Not only are the Americans missionaries, they are also Anabaptists: having missed out on the original baptism, they dream of baptizing everything a second time and only accord value to this later sacrament which is, as we know, a repeat performance of the first, but its repetition as something more real. And this indeed is the perfect definition of the simulacrum. All Anabaptists are sectarians, and sometimes violent. Americans are no exception to this rule. To reconstruct things in their exact form, so as to present them on the Day of Judgement, they are prepared to destroy and exterminate - Thomas Müntzer was an Anabaptist.
It is not by chance that it is the Mormons who run the world’s biggest computerization project: the recording of twenty generations of living souls throughout the world, a process which is seen as a rebaptizing of those souls, bringing them a new promise of salvation. Evangelization has become a mission of mutants, of extraterrestrials, and if it has progressed (? in that direction, it is thanks to the latest memory-storage techniques. And these have been made possible by the deep puritanism of computer science, an intensely Calvinistic, Presbyterian discipline, which has inherited the universal and scientific rigidity of the techniques for achieving salvation by good works. The Counter-Reformation methods of the Catholic Church, with its naive sacramental practices, its cults, its more archaic and popular beliefs, could never compete with this modernity.

Executive Terminal
Basic Extirmination
Metastatic Consumption

Everywhere survival has become a burning issue, perhaps by some obscure weariness of life or a collective desire for catastrophe (though we should not take all this too seriously: it is also a playing at catastrophe). Certainly, this whole panoply of survival issues—dieting, ecology, saving the sequoias, seals or the human race—tends to prove that we are very much alive (just as all imaginary fairy-tales tend to prove that the real world is very real). But this is not so certain, for not only is the fact of living not really well-attested, but the paradox of this society is that you cannot even die in it anymore; since you are already dead... This is real suspense. And it is not simply an effect of living in the nuclear age, but derives from the ease with which we now live, which makes survivors of us all. If the bomb drops, we shall neither have the time to die nor any awareness of dying. But already in our hyper-protected society we no longer have any awareness of death, since we have subtly passed over into a state where life is excessively easy.

The holocaust created an anticipatory form of such a condition. What the inmates of the concentration camps were deprived of was the very possibility of having control of their own deaths, of playing, even gambling with their own deaths, making their deaths a sacrifice: they were robbed of power over their own deaths. And this is what is happening to all of us, in slow, homeopathic doses, by virtue of the very development of our systems. The explosions and the extermination (Auschwitz and Hiroshima) still go on, though they have simply taken on a purulent, endemic form. The chain reaction continues nonetheless, the contagion, the unfolding of the viral and bacteriological process. The end of history was precisely the inauguration of this chain reaction.

The obsessive desire for survival (and not for life) is a symptom of this state of affairs and doubtless also the most worrying sign of the degradation of the species. If you think about the forms that desire currently takes—antinuclear shelters, cryogenization, high-pressure therapy—you see that they are exactly the forms of extermination. To avoid dying, one chooses to withdraw into some protective bubble or other. In this light, we should take it as a reassuring sign that people lost interest in antinuclear protection so quickly the shelter market has become a mere prestige market, like the market for artworks or luxury yachts. It seems that people have become tired of nuclear blackmail and decided not to give in to it, leaving the threat of destruction hanging in mid-air over them, perhaps with an obscure sense of how unreal it is. A fine example of a vital reaction disguised as resignation. ‘If we have to die, better to die in the open air than in an underground sarcophagus.’ At a stroke an end is put to survival blackmail and life can go on.

Everyone is weary of these apocalyptic visions— the great scenario of the nuclear threat, the theatrical negotiations, Star Wars. In the end, they
defend themselves with a lack of imagination. Even attempts to stimulate that imagination in films like *The Last Day* have not worked. Nothing has ever been able to make this nuclear sense - or obscenity - credible. With delicate matters like this (as with cancer), imagining death has the effect of bringing the fatal event closer. The masses' silent indifference to nuclear paths (whether it comes from the nuclear powers or from antinuclear campaigners) is therefore a great sign of hope and a political fact of the utmost importance.

There is a science-fiction story in which a number of very rich people wake up one morning in their luxury villas in the mountains to find that they are encircled by a transparent and insuperable obstacle, a wall of glass that has appeared in the night. From the depths of their vitrified luxury, they can still just discern the outside world, the real universe from which they are cut off, which has suddenly become the ideal world. But it is too late. These rich people will die slowly in their aquarium like goldfish. Some of the university campuses here remind me of this.

Lost among the pine trees, the fields, and the rivers (it's an old ranch that was donated to the university), and made up of little blocks, each one out of sight of the others, like the people who live in them: this one is Santa Cruz. It's a bit like the Bermuda Triangle (or Santa Barbara). Everything vanishes. Everything gets sucked in. Total decentering, total community. After the ideal city of the future, the ideal cosy nook. Nothing converges on a single point, neither the traffic, nor the architecture, nor authority. But, by that very token, it also becomes impossible to hold a demonstration: where could you assemble? Demonstrations can only go round and round in the forest, where the participants alone can see them. Of all the Californian campuses, famous for their spaciousness and charm, this is the most idealized, the most naturalized. It is the epitome of all that is beautiful.

Famous architects designed the buildings and the bays of Carmel and Monterey stretch out all around. If the conviviality of the future already exists somewhere, then this must be the place. And yet this freedom, protected both by the pleasantness of the vegetation and by academic openness, becomes its own prisoner once again, immured in a natural and social overprotectedness which ends up producing all the agonies of the carceral universe (precisely by virtue of its walls, the carceral system may in certain conditions evolve in the direction of utopia more rapidly than open social systems). Society has become emancipated here as nowhere else on earth. The psychiatric hospitals have been opened up, public transport is free, and yet paradoxically this ideal has become closed in on itself as if behind a wall of glass.

A paradisiac and inward-looking illusion. We might understand what Lyotard calls the 'Pacific Wall' as the wall of crystal that imprisons California in its own beatitude. But whereas the demand for happiness used to be something oceanic and emancipatory, here it comes wrapped up in a feotis tranquillity. Are there still passions, murders, and acts of violence in this strange, padded, wooded, pacified, convivial republic? Yes, but the violence is autetic and reactionary. There are no crimes of passion, but there are rapes, and a case where a dozen women were murdered in two years before the killer was discovered. This is feotis violence, as gratuitous as 'automatic writing'. It seems an expression not so much of real aggression as of nostalgia for the old prohibitions (why does the number of rapes increase with the degree of sexual liberation?).

How sentimental those mixed dormitories seem, opening out here on to the forest, as if nature itself could be convivial and maternal, could herself stand as guarantor for the blossoming of sexuality and the ecology of manners, as if nature could look sympathetically upon any human society, as if one could have some relationship with her, outside the cruel universe of magic, which was not stoical, not the Stoics' relation between a blind,
pallid necessity and the even greater defiance, the even greater freedom one has to counterpose to it. Here, every last vestige of a heroic sense of destiny has disappeared. The whole place exudes an air of sentimental reconciliation with nature, with sex, with madness and even with history (by way of a carefully corrected, revised Marxism).

Like many other aspects of contemporary America, Santa Cruz is part of the post-orgy world, the world left behind after the great social and sexual convolutions. The refugees from the orgy - the orgy of sex, political violence, the Vietnam War, the Woodstock Crusade, and the ethnic and anti-capitalist struggles too, together with the passion for money, the passion for success, hard technologies etc., in short, the whole orgy of modernity - are all there, jogging along in their tribalism, which is akin to the electronic tribalism of Silicon Valley. Reduced pace of work, decentralization, air-conditioning, soft technologies. Paradise. But a very slight modification, a change of just a few degrees, would suffice to make it seem like hell.

A new development in the field of sexuality. The orgy is over, liberation is over; it is not sex one is looking for but one's 'gender', i.e. both one's 'look' and its genetic formula. People no longer oscillate between desire and its fulfillment, but between their genetic formula and their sexual identity (to be discovered). This is a new erotic culture. After a culture based on prohibition ("What are your prerequisites for sex?" - "The door has to be locked, the lights have to be out, and my mother has to be in another state"), this is a culture based on the questioning of one's own definition: 'Am I sexual? What sex am I? Ultimately, is sex necessary? What does sexual difference consist in?' Liberation has left everyone in an undefined state (it is always the same: once you are liberated, you are forced to ask who you are). After a triumphalist phase, the assertion of female sexuality has become as fragile as that of male sexuality. No one knows where they are. This is why there's so much love-making, so many children produced: there at least you still have proof that two people are needed as difference still exists. But not for long. Already, the 'muscle-woman', who, simply by using her vaginal muscles, manages to reproduce the effect of male penetration exactly, is a good example of self-referentiality and of getting along without difference - she at least has found her label.

The more general problem is one of an absence of difference, bound up with a decline in the display of sexual characteristics. The outer signs of masculinity are tending towards zero, but so are the signs of femininity. It is in this conjuncture that we have seen new idols emerging, idols who take up the challenge of undifferentiation and who play at mixing gender/genders. 'Gender benders'. Neither masculine nor feminine, but not homosexual either. Boy George, Michael Jackson, David Bowie... Whereas the idols of the previous generation were explosive figures of sex and pleasure, these new idols pose for everyone the question of the play of difference and their own lack of definition. They are exceptional figures. For want of an identity, most of them have gone in search of a 'gender model', a genetic formula. Some kind of differentiating feature has to be found, so why not look for it in fashion... or in genetics? A 'look' based on clothes, or a 'look' based on cells. Any old gimmick will do, any idiom. The question of difference is more crucial than that of pleasure. Are we seeing here a post-modern version of a sexual liberation that is now past and gone, that liberation as mere fashion, or is this a bio-sociological mutation in our own self-perception, based upon the sexual losing the priority it formerly enjoyed, a priority which characterized the whole modern period? 'Gender Research: a New Frontier?'

Pushed to its logical conclusions, this would leave neither masculine nor feminine, but a dissemination of individual sexes referring only to themselves, each one managed as an independent enterprise. The end of seduction, the end of difference, and a slide towards a different system of
values. An astonishing paradox emerges: sexuality might become once again a merely secondary problem, as it was in most earlier societies, and be eclipsed by other stronger symbols - systems (birth, hierarchy, asceticism, glory, death). This would prove that sexuality was after all only one possible model among many, and not the most crucial. But what might those new models be today (for in the meantime all the others have disappeared)? The model that seems likely to emerge is that of an ideal of performance, of the genetic fulfillment of one's own formula. In business, in emotional life, in their projects and their pleasures, everyone will seek to develop their optimum program. Everyone will have their code, their formula. But also their 'look', their image. So shall we perhaps get something like a genetic 'look'?

Irvine: A new Silicon Valley. Electronic factories with no openings to the outside world, like integrated circuits. A desert zone, given over to ions and electrons, a supra-human place, the product of inhuman decision-making. By a terrible twist of irony it just had to be here, in the hills of Irvine, that they shot Planet of the Apes. But, on the lawn, the American squirrels tell us all is well, and that America is kind to animals, to itself, and to the rest of the world, and that in everyone's heart there is a slumbering squirel. The whole Walt Disney philosophy eats out of your hand with these pretty little sentimental creatures in grey fur coats. For my own part, I believe that behind these smiling eyes there lurks a cold, ferocious beast fearfully stalking us... On the same lawn with the squirrels stands a sign put there by some society or other of Jesus: "Vietnam, Cambodia, Lebanon, Grenada - We are a violent society in a violent world."

There is nothing funny about Halloween. This sarcastic festival reflects, rather, an infernal demand for revenge by children on the adult world. The threat from this evil force hangs over adults here, equal in intensity only to their devotion to children. There is nothing more unhealthy than this childish sorcery, behind all the dressing up and the presents - people turn out their lights and hide, for fear of harassment. And it is no accident that some of them stick needles or razor blades into the apples or cookies they hand out to the children.

Laughter on American television has taken the place of the chorus in Greek tragedy. It is unrelenting: the news, the stock-exchange reports, and the weather forecast are about the only things spared. But so obsessive is it that you go on hearing it behind the voice of Reagan or the Marines disaster in Beirut, even behind the adverts. It is the monster from Alien prowling around in all the corridors of the spaceship. It is the sarcastic exhilaration of a puritan culture. In other countries, the business of laughing is left to the viewer. Here, their laughter is put on the screen, integrated into the show. It is the screen that is laughing and having a good time. You are simply left alone with your consternation.

Vietnam on television (a pleonasm, since it is always a television war). The Americans fight with two essential weapons: air power and information. That is, with the physical bombardment of the enemy and the electronic bombardment of the rest of the world. These are non-territorial weapons, whilst all the Vietnamese weapons and all their tactics were products of the people and its territory.

That is why the war was won by both sides: by the Vietnamese on the ground, by the Americans in the electronic mental space. And if the one side won an ideological and political victory, the other made Apocalypse Now and that has gone right around the world.
The obsessive fear of the Americans is that the lights might go out. Lights are left on all night in the houses. In the tower blocks the empty offices remain lit. On the freeways, in broad daylight, the cars keep all their headlights on. In Palms Ave., Venice, California, a little grocery store that sells beer in a part of town where no one is on the streets after 7 p.m. leaves its orange and green neon sign flashing all night, into the void. And this is not to mention the television, with its twenty-four-hour schedules, often to be seen functioning like an hallucination in the empty rooms of houses or vacant hotel rooms – as in the Porterville hotel where the curtains were torn, the water cut off, and the doors swinging in the wind, but on the fluorescent screen in each of the rooms a TV commentator was describing the take-off of the space shuttle. There is nothing more mysterious than a TV set left on in an empty room. It is even stranger than a man talking to himself or a woman standing dreaming at her stove. It is as if another planet is communicating with you. Suddenly the TV reveals itself for what it really is: a video of another world, ultimately addressed to no one at all, delivering its images indifferently, indifferent to its own messages (you can easily imagine it still functioning after humanity has disappeared). In short, in America the arrival of night-time or periods of rest cannot be accepted, nor can the Americans bear to see the technological process halted. Everything has to be working all the time, there has to be no let-up in man’s artificial power, and the intermittent character of natural cycles (the seasons, day and night, heat and cold) has to be replaced by a functional continuum that is sometimes absurd (deep down, there is the same refusal of the intermittent nature of true and false: everything is true; and of good and evil: everything is good). You may seek to explain this in terms of fear, perhaps obsessive fear, or say that this unproductive expenditure is an act of mourning. But what is absurd is also admirable. The skylines lit up at dead of night, the air-conditioning systems cooling empty hotels in the desert and artificial light in the middle of the day all have something both demented and admirable about them. The mindless luxury of a rich civilization, and yet of a civilization perhaps as scared to see the lights go out as was the hunter in his primitive night. There is some truth in all of this. But what is striking is the fascination with artifice, with energy and space. And not only natural space: space is spacious in their heads as well.

All great world powers have at some time or another created their monumental avenues which provided, as one looked down them, a miniature representation of the infinitude of empire. But the Aztecs at Teotihuacan, the Egyptians in the Valley of Kings, and Louis XIV at Versailles all created these syntheses in an architecture that was their own. Here in Washington, the vast panorama that stretches from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol is made up of a series of museums encapsulating our entire universe from Stone Age to Space Age. This gives the whole thing a science-fiction feel, as if an attempt had been made to gather all the marks of earthly endeavour and culture together here for the benefit of a visitor from outer space. And the White House, standing just alongside, watching discreetly over the whole, itself comes to look like a museum, the museum of world power, with an air of remoteness and prophylactic whiteness.

There is nothing to match flying over Los Angeles by night. A sort of luminous, geometric, incandescent immensity, stretching as far as the eye can see, bursting out from the cracks in the clouds. Only Hieronymus Bosch’s hell can match this infernal effect. The muted fluorescence of all the diagonals: Wilshire, Lincoln, Sunset, Santa Monica. Already, flying over Sen Fernando Valley, you come upon the horizontal infinite in every direction. But, once you are beyond the mountain, a city ten times larger hits you. You will never have encountered anything that stretches as far as this
before. Even the sea cannot match it, since it is not divided up geometrically. The irregular, scattered flickering of European cities does not produce the same parallel lines, the same vanishing points, the same aerial perspectives either. They are medieval cities. This one condenses by night the entire future geometry of the networks of human relations, gleaming in their abstraction, luminous in their extension, astral in their reproduction to infinity. Mulholland Drive by night is an extraterrestrial vantage-point on earth, or conversely, an earth-dweller's vantage-point on the Galactic metropolis.

Dawn in Los Angeles, coming up over the Hollywood hills. You get the distinct feeling that the sun only touched Europe lightly on its way to rising properly here, above this plane geometry where its light is still that brand new light of the edge of the desert. Long-stemmed palm trees, swaying in front of the electronic billboard, the only vertical signs in this two-dimensional world.

At 6 a.m. a man is already telephoning from a public phonebox in Beverly Terrace. The neon signs of the night are going out as the daytime ones become visible. The light everywhere reveals and illuminates the absence of architecture. This is what gives the city its beauty, this city that is so intimate and warm, whatever anyone says of it: the fact is it is in love with its limitless horizontality, as New York may be with its verticality.

LOS ANGELES FREEWAYS

Gigantic, spontaneous spectacle of automotive traffic. A total collective act, staged by the entire population, twenty-four hours a day. By virtue of the sheer size of the layout and the kind of complicity that binds this network of thoroughfares together, traffic rises here to the level of a dramatic attraction, acquires the status of symbolic organization. The machines themselves, with their fluidity and their automatic transmission, have created a milieu in their own image, a milieu into which you insert yourself gently, which you switch over to as you might switch over to a TV channel. Unlike our European motorways, which are unique, directional axes, and are therefore still places of expulsion (Verlilio), the freeway system is a place of integration (they even say that there are families who drive round on these roads in their mobile homes without ever leaving). It creates a different state of mind, and the European driver very quickly gives up his aggressive, every-man-for-himself behaviour and his individual reactions, and adopts the rules of this collective game. There is something of the freedom of movement that you have in the desert here, and indeed Los Angeles, with its extensive structure, is merely an inhabited fragment of the desert. Thus the freeways do not de-nature the city or the landscape; they simply pass through it and unravel it without altering the desert character of this particular metropolis. And they are ideally suited to the only truly profound pleasure, that of keeping on the move.

To the person who knows the American freeways, their signs read like a litany: 'Right lane must exit.' This 'must exit' has always struck me as a sign of destiny. I have got to go, to expel myself from this paradise, leave this providential highway which leads nowhere, but keeps me in touch with everyone. This is the only real society or warmth here, this collective propulsion, this compulsion - a compulsion of lemmings plunging suicidally together. Why should I tear myself away to revert to an individual trajectory, a vain sense of responsibility? 'Must exit': you are being sentenced. You are a player being exiled from the only - useless and glorious - form of collective existence. Through traffic merge left, they tell
you everything, everything is announced. Merely reading the signs that are essential to your survival gives you an extraordinary feeling of instant lucidity, of reflex 'participation', immediate and smooth. Of a functional participation that is reflected in certain precise gestures. The lines of traffic diverging towards Ventura Freeway and San Diego Freeway do not leave one another, they just separate out. At every hour of the day approximately the same number split off towards Hollywood or towards Santa Monica. Pure, statistical energy, a ritual being acted out - the regularity of the flows cancels out individual destinations. What you have here is the charm of ceremonies; you have the whole of space before you, just as ceremonies have the whole of time before them.

The point is not to write the sociology or psychology of the car, the point is to drive. That way you learn more about this society than all academia could ever tell you.

The way American cars have of leaping into action, of taking off so smoothly, by virtue of their automatic transmission and power steering. Pulling away effortlessly, noiselessly eating up the road, gliding along without the slightest bump (the surfaces of the highways and freeways are remarkable, matched only by the fluidity of the cars’ performance), braking smoothly but instantly, riding along as if you were on a cushion of air, leaving behind the old obsession with what is coming up ahead, or what is overtaking you (there is an unspoken agreement on collective driving here; in Europe we have only the highway code). All this creates a new experience of space, and, at the same time, a new experience of the whole social system. All you need to know about American society can be gleaned from an anthropology of its driving behaviour. That behaviour tells you much more than you could ever learn from its political ideas. Drive ten thousand

miles across America and you will know more about the country than all the institutes of sociology and political science put together.

The city was here before the freeway system, no doubt, but it now looks as though the metropolis has actually been built around this arterial network. It is the same with American reality. It was there before the screen was invented, but everything about the way it is today suggests it was invented with the screen in mind, that it is the refraction of a giant screen. This is not like a Platonic shadowplay, but more as if everything were carried along by, and balled in, the gleam of the screen. Along with flux and mobility, the screen and its refraction are fundamental determinants of everyday events. A fusion of the kinetic and the cinematic produces a different mental configuration and overall perception from our own. You do not find mobility or the screen taking precedence over reality in the same way in Europe, where things most often remain within the static form of territory, the palpable form of substances.

In fact, the cinema here is not where you think it is. It is certainly not to be found in the studios the tourist crowds flock to - Universal, Paramount, etc., those subdivisions of Disneyland. If you believe that the whole of the Western world is hypostatized in America, the whole of America in California, and California in MGM and Disneyland, then this is the microcosm of the West.

In act what you are presented with in the studios is the degeneration of the cinematographic illusion, its mockery, just as what is offered in Disneyland is a parody of the world of the imagination. The sumptuous age of stars and images is reduced to a few artificial tornado effects, pathetic fake buildings, and childish tricks which the crowd pretends to be taken in by to avoid
feeling too disappointed. Ghost towns, ghost people. The whole place has the same air of obsequiousness about it as Sunset or Hollywood Boulevard. You come out feeling as though you have been put through some trifling simulacral test. Where is the cinema? It is all around you outside, all over the city, that marvellous, continuous performance of films and scenarios. Everywhere but here.

It is not the least of America's charms that even outside the movie theatres the whole country is cinematic. The desert you pass through is like the set of a Western, the city a screen of signs and formulas. It is the same feeling you get when you step out of an Italian or a Dutch gallery into a city that seems the very reflection of the paintings you have just seen, as if the city had come out of the paintings and not the other way about. The American city seems to have stepped right out of the movies. To grasp its secret, you should not, then, begin with the city and move inwards to the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards to the city. It is there that cinema does not assume an exceptional form, but simply invests the streets and the entire town with a mythical atmosphere. That is where it is truly gripping. This is why the cult of stars is not a secondary phenomenon, but the supreme form of cinema, its mythical transfiguration, the last great myth of our modernity. Precisely because the idol is merely a pure, contagious image, a violently realized ideal. They say that stars give you something to dream about, but there is a difference between dreaming and fascination by images. The screen idols are immanent in the unfolding of life as a series of images. They are a system of luxury prefabrication, brilliant syntheses of the stereotypes of life and love. They embody one single passion only: the passion for image, and the immanence of desire in the image. They are not something to dream about; they are the dream. And they have all the characteristics of dreams: they produce a marked condensation (crystallization) effect and an

effect of contiguity (they are immediately contagious), and, above all, they have that power of instantaneous visual materialization (Anachauliczität) of desire, which is also a feature of dreams. They do not, therefore, feed the romantic or sexual imagination; they are immediate visibility, immediate transcription, material collage, precipitation of desire. Fetishes, fetish objects, that have nothing to do with the world of the imagination, but everything to do with the material fiction of the image.

In 1969 the Revolutionary Olympic Games will be held in Los Angeles to mark the bicentenary of the French Revolution. The flame of history passes to the West Coast. This is normal. Everything that disappears in Europe is born again in San Francisco. We may envisage a reconstruction of the great revolutionary scenes in giant holograms, the most extensive archives, a complete film library, the best actors, the best historians. A century from now you will not be able to tell the difference. It will be as if the Revolution had taken place here. If the Getty villa at Malibu were suddenly engulfed by lava, what difference would there be, a few centuries from now, between that building and the ruins of Pompeii?

What would the promoters of the bicentenary do if a new revolution broke out between now and 1989? But there is no way that can happen. And yet you cannot help but wish that the actual event might really occur and short-circuit the simulacrum, or that the simulacrum might itself end in catastrophe. In the same way, at Universal Studios, you hope constantly that the special effects will turn into some real drama. But this is a final nostalgia which has actually been exploited by the cinema itself (Wesworld, Future World). The Olympic Games - total happening, collective participation in national self-celebration. 'We did it!' We are the best. Reagan style. It would have taken another Leni Riefenstahl to film this new Berlin '36. Totally sponsored, totally euphoric, totally clean, a 100 per cent advertising event.
No accidents, no catastrophes, no terrorism, no traffic-jams on the freeways, no panic and... no Soviets. In short, an image of an ideal world, for the whole world to see. But after the osnum the world's a sort of collective melancholy comes over the Angelinos, showing how provincial this metropolis still is.

If you get out of your car in this centrifugal metropolis, you immediately become a delinquent; as soon as you start walking, you are a threat to public order, like a dog wandering in the road. Only immigrants from the Third World are allowed to walk. If it is, in a sense, their privilege, a privilege that goes along with that of occupying the empty hearts of the big cities. For other people, walking, fatigue, or muscular activity have become rare commodities, 'services' costing a lot of money. Thus, ironically, the old state of affairs has been inverted. Similarly, the queues at high-class restaurants or fashionable nightclubs are often longer than those at soup kitchens. This is democracy. The signs of the most utter poverty always have at least a chance of becoming fashionable.

One of America's specific problems is fame and glory, partly on account of its extreme rarity these days, but also because of its extreme vulgarization. 'In the future, everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes' (Andy Warhol). And it is true. Take, for example, the man who got on the wrong plane and found himself carted off to Auckland, New Zealand, instead of Oakland, near San Francisco. This event made him the hero of the day. He was interviewed everywhere and they are making a film about him. In this country, it is not the highest virtue, nor the heroic act, that achieves fame, but the uncommon nature of the least significant destiny. There is plenty for everyone, then, since the more conformist the system as a whole becomes,
perpetual dialogue with the computer – ends up with each monad retreating into the shade of its own formula, into its self-regulating little corner and its artificial immaturity. Blocks like the Bonaventure building claim to be perfect, self-sufficient miniature cities. But they cut themselves off from the city more than they interact with it. They stop seeing it. They retract it like a dark surface. And you cannot get out of the building itself. You cannot fathom out its internal space, but it has no mystery; it is just like those games where you have to join all the dots together without any line crossing another. Here too everything connects, without any two pairs of eyes ever meeting.

It is the same outside.

A camouflaged individual, with a long nose, feathers, and a yellow cap, a madman in fancy dress, wanders along the sidewalks downtown, and nobody, but nobody, looks at him. They do not look at other people here. They are much too afraid they will throw themselves upon them with unbearable sexual demands, requests for money or affection. Everything is charged with a somnambulistic violence and you must avoid contact to escape its potential discharge. Now that the mad have been let out of the asylums everyone is seen as a potential madman. Everything is so informal, there is so little in the way of reserve or manners (except for that eternal film of a smile, which offers only a very slimy protection), that you feel anything could blow up at any moment. By some chain reaction, all this latent hysteria could be released at a stroke. The same feeling in New York, where panic is almost the characteristic smell of the city streets. Sometimes it takes the form of a gigantic breakdown, as in 1976.

All around, the tinted glass facades of the buildings are like faces: frosted surfaces. It is as though there were no one inside the buildings, as if there were no one behind the faces. And there really is no one. This is what the ideal city is like.

First International Bank, Crocker Bank, Bank of America, Pentecostal Savings (or is that one a church?) All bunched together in the heart of the city, alongside the big airlines. Money is fluid. Like grace, it is yours. Coming to claim it is an offence against the divinity. Have you deserved this favour? Who are you and what are you going to do with it? You are suspected of wanting to put it to some use, and an evil one no doubt, whereas money is so beautiful in the fluid and intemporal state it is in at the bank, when it is being invested rather than spent. Shame on you and kiss the hand that gives it to you.

It is true that ownership of money burns your fingers, like power. We need people to take this risk for us and we should be eternally grateful to them. This is why I hesitate to deposit money in a bank. I am afraid I shall never dare to take it out again. When you go to confession and entrust your sins to the safe-keeping of the priest, do you ever come back for them? And yet the atmosphere in a bank is that of the confessional (there is no more Kafkaesque situation): admit that you have money, confess that this is not normal. And it is true: having money is an awkward situation, from which the bank is only too happy to deliver you: 'Your money interests us' – the bank holds you to ransom, its greed knows no bounds. Its immodest gaze reveals your private parts to you, and you are forced to hand your money over to appease it. One day I tried to close my account, taking all the money out in cash. The teller would not let me go with such a sum on me: it was obscene, dangerous, immoral. Would I not at least take travellers' cheques? 'No, the whole lot in cash.' I was mad. In America, you are stark raving mad if, instead of believing in money and its marvellous fluidity, you want to carry it round on you in banknotes. Money is dirty; that you must admit. And we really do need all these concrete and metal sanctuaries to protect us from it. So banks fulfill a crucial social function, and it is quite logical that these buildings should form the monumental heart of every town and city.
One of the finest things there is, at dawn: the Santa Monica pier, with the white waves rolling in, the sky grey over Venice, the pale green or turquoise hotel overlooking the sands, and the endless line of run-down motels with their gritty little lamps, their graffiti-covered walls. The first wave, already frequented by a few insomniaic surfers, the oh-so-melancholy palm trees with their Roaring Twenties grace, and the merry-go-round. The bay that bends round towards Long Beach is as vast as the Bay of Ipanema in Rio, the only one of comparable size. But, unlike Rio with its proud, luxurious, and pretentious (though none the less beautiful) sea front, here the town ends almost in a piece of wasteground at the ocean, like a seaside suburb. And it has indeed the hazy charm of just such a suburb. Here at dawn, it is one of the most insignificant shorelines in the world, just a place to go fishing. The Western World ends on a shore devoid of all significance, like a journey that loses all meaning when it reaches its end. The immense metropolis of Los Angeles peters out here in the sea like a desert, with all the nonchalence of a desert.

'LIVE OR DIE': the graffiti message on the pier at Santa Monica is mysterious, because we really have no choice between life and death. If you live, you live, if you die, you die. It is like saying 'be yourself, or don't be!' It is stupid, and yet it is enigmatic. You could read it to mean that you should live intensely or else disappear, but that is banal. Following the model of 'pay or die!', 'your money or your life!', it would become 'your life or your life'. Stupid again, since you cannot exchange life for itself. And yet there is poetic force in this implacable tautology, as there always is when there is nothing to be understood. In the end, the lesson of this graffiti is perhaps: 'if you get more stupid than me, you die!' Where the others spend their time in libraries, I spend mine in the deserts and on the roads. Where they draw their material from the history of ideas, I draw mine from what is happening now, from the life of the streets, the beauty of nature. This country is native, so you have to be native. Everything here still bears the marks of a primitive society: technologies, the media, total simulation (bio-, socio-, stereo-, video-) are developing in a wild state, in their original state. Insignificance exists on a grand scale and the desert remains the primal scene, even in the big cities. Inordinate space, a simplicity of language and character...

My hunting grounds are the deserts, the mountains, Los Angeles, the freeways, the Safeways, the ghost towns, or the downtowns, not lectures at the university. I know the deserts, their deserts, better than they do, since they turn their backs on their own space as the Greeks turned their backs on the sea, and I get to know more about the concrete, social life of America from the desert than I ever would from official or intellectual gatherings.

American culture is heir to the deserts, but the deserts here are not part of a Nature defined by contrast with the town. Rather they denote the emptiness, the radical nudity that is the background to every human institution. At the same time, they designate human institutions as a metaphor of that emptiness and the work of man as the continuity of the desert, culture as a mirage and as the perpetuity of the simulacrum. The natural deserts tell me what I need to know about the deserts of the sign. They teach me to read surface and movement and geology and immobility at the same time. They create a vision exurbanated of all the rest: cities, relationships, events, media. They induce in me an exaltation vision of the desertification of signs and men. They form the mental frontier where the projects of civilization run into the ground. They are outside the sphere and circumference of desire. We should always appeal to the deserts...
against the excess of signification, of intention and pretention in culture. They are our mythic operator.

ROMERO SADDLE – CAMINO CIELO – BLUE CANYON – QUICK SILVER MINE – SYCAMORE CANYON – SAN RAPHAEL WILDERNESS

As night is falling, after three hours driving, I am lost in the San Raphael Wilderness. Driving on and on towards the last of the sun’s rays, then by the headlights reflecting in the sand of the river bed. Will I get through or won’t? Darkness is falling all around: the prospect of spending the night with no loons, but the whisky creates a delicious sense of abandon. At last, after two hours driving and a descent into hell, I am resurrected in heaven, on the Camino Cielo ridge, with an aerial, night-time view of the lights of Santa Barbara.

PORTERVILLE

The journey here through forests of orange trees, their leaves a deep, geometric green, laid out neatly on wild hillsides that are carpeted with undulating grass like animal fur and resemble the hilly Tuscany. A driveway lined by fifty palm trees, all the same height and absolutely symmetrical, leads up to a planter’s house that is minuscule by comparison. All its shutters are closed. It could be a colonial scene, but in fact these are the western slopes of the Rockies, at the foot of Sequoia National Park. The road down into this town that is not really a town is as straight as the rows of orange trees and is peopled by Mexican slaves who have bought up their masters’ old 1950s Chevrolets. You go down through an oleander-lined avenue. But the real revelation is the town itself, which is completely devoid – to a point unintelligible to us Europeans – of any centre. You drive up and down every street in the town without being able to find anything remotely like a central point. Without even a bank, an administrative building, or a town hall, the town has no coordinates; it is like a plantation. The only sign of life: an American flag, just alongside the dead centre of the town, the hotel. This is the only three-storey building and its torn curtains flap through the broken window-panes in the warm late-afternoon wind. The hotel rooms can’t even be opened. The Mexican owner can’t find the keys. The priors are ridiculously low. You can spend a week here for twenty dollars. And yet in every room, with its sagging mattress and its dusty mirror, the TV is constantly on, apparently not for any resident, since it is on in the rooms that are open to the winds and those that can’t even be opened. You can see the televions, or at least their reflections, from the street, through the curtains. All the corridors, with their worn-out carpets, display a single sign: EXIT. You can leave in any direction you like. You can rent three rooms here for a week for the price of a night in an ordinary motel. Forty years ago, no doubt, it was a hotel for Bakersfield’s stark set when they escaped to the cool of the mountains. Today it is the heart of Porterville, and an irrevocable process of decay has set in. But it is too hot to worry about that.

Darkness falls slowly on Porterville, and Saturday night fever begins. ‘American Graffiti 85.’ All the cars drive up and down the main thoroughfare in slow or animated procession, a collective parade, drinking, eating ice-cream, calling out from one car to the next (whereas in the daytime they all drive round oblivious of anyone else). Music, PA systems, beer, ice-cream. It is the same ceremony, on a smaller scale, as the slow nocturnal cruising on the Strip in Las Vegas, or the procession of cars on the Los Angeles freeways simply transformed into a Saturday night provincial extravaganza. The only element of culture, the only mobile element, the car. No cultural centre, no
centre of entertainment. A primitive society: the same motor identification, the same collective phantasy of an unfolding ritual—breakfast, movie, religious service, love and death—the whole of life as a drive-in. Truly magnificent. It is all in this parade of bulbous cyphers, histrionic and silent (the whole thing passes off in relative silence with no gear changes and no overtaking: these are the same fluid monsters with their automatic transmissions, gliding along smoothly one behind the other). Nothing else will happen during the evening. Except that is for the madcap race between the 12-15-year-old girls—like cowgirls from a Western—which takes place in a corner of the town, under floodlights, in the dust kicked up by the horses, near the baseball park. And the next morning, Sunday morning, the deserted streets, streets hardly distinct from the desert, have a preternatural calm about them. The air is transparent, with the orange trees all around. After the night’s automobile ceremony the town is abandoned now to the light of its over-wide avenues, the lifeless stores, the half-awake service stations. Natural, orphaned light, without headlights or advertising signs. Just a few Mexicans cruise around in their long cars, while the first Whites wash theirs in front of their open verandas. The luminous insignificance of Sunday morning. A holographic micro-model of all America.

Death Valley is as big and mysterious as ever. Fire, heat, light: all the elements of sacrifice are here. You always have to bring something into the desert to sacrifice, and offer it to the desert as a victim. A woman. If something has to disappear, something matching the desert for beauty, why not a woman?

Nothing is more alien to American deserts than symbiosis (close-fitting clothing, slow rhythms, oases) such as you find in native desert cultures. Here, everything human is artificial. Furnace Creek is a synthetic, air-conditioned oasis. But there is nothing more beautiful than artificial coolness in the midst of heat, artificial speed in the middle of a natural expanse, electric light under a blazing sun, or the artificial practice of gambling in lost casinos. Reyner Banham is right: Death Valley and Las Vegas are inseparable; you have to accept everything at once, an unchanging timelessness and the wildest instantaneous. There is a mysterious affinity between the sterility of wide open spaces and that of gambling, between the sterility of speed and that of expenditure. That is the originality of the deserts of the American West; it lies in that violent, electric juxtaposition. And the same applies to the whole country: you must accept everything at once, because it is this telescoping that gives the American way of life its illuminating, exhilarating side just as, in the desert, everything contributes to the magic of the desert. If you approach this society with the nuances of moral, aesthetic, or critical judgement, you will miss its originality, which comes precisely from its defying judgement and pulling off a prodigious confusion of effects. To side-step that confusion and excess is simply to evade the challenge it throws down to you. The violence of its contrasts, the absence of discrimination between positive and negative effects, the telescoping of races, technologies, and models, the waltz of simulacra and images here is such that, as with dream elements, you must accept the way they follow one another, even if it seems unintelligible; you must come to see this whirl of things and events as an irresistible, fundamental datum.

The distinctions that are made elsewhere have little meaning here. It would be misguided to focus on aspects of an American civility that is often in fact far superior to our own (in our land of ‘high culture’) and then to point out that in other respects the Americans are barbarians. It would be wrong-headed to counterfeit Death Valley, the sublime natural phenomenon, to Las Vegas, the abject cultural phenomenon. For the one is the hidden face of the other and they mirror each other across the desert, the one as a facade of secrecy and silence, the other as facade of prostitution and theatricality.
Having said that, there is something mysterious about Death Valley in itself. However beautiful the deserts of Utah and California may be, this one is something else again — something sublime. The pentane natural heat haze that envelops it, its inverse depth — below sea level — this landscape with its underground features, its salt surfaces and mudhills, the high mountain chains surrounding it, making it a kind of inner sanctuary — a gentle, spectral place of initiation (which comes from its geological depth and the atmosphere of spiritual limbo). What has always struck me about Death Valley is its mildness, its pastel shades and its fossil vein, the misty fantasmagoria of its mineral opera. There is nothing funereal or morbid about it: a transmutation in which everything is palpable, the mineral softness of the air, the mineral substance of the light, the corporeal fluid of the colours, the total extraversion of one's body in the heat. A fragment of another planet (at least predating any form of human life), where another, deeper temporality reigns, on whose surface you float as you would on salt-laden waters. The senses, the mind, and even your sense of belonging to the human race are all numbed by the fact of having before you the pure, unadulterated sign of 180 million years, and therefore the implacable enigma of your own existence. It is the only place where it is possible to relive, alongside the physical spectrum of colours, the spectrum of the inhuman metamorphoses that preceded us, our successive historical forms: the mineral, the organic, salt desert, sand dunes, rock, ice, light, heat, everything the earth has been, all the inhuman forms it has been through, gathered together in a single anthropological vision.

The desert is a natural extension of the inner silence of the body. If humanity's language, technology, and buildings are an extension of its constructive faculties, the desert alone is an extension of its capacity for absence, the ideal schema of humanity's disappearance. When you come out of the Mojave, writes Burcham, it is difficult to focus less than fifteen miles ahead of you. Your eye can no longer rest on objects that are near. It can no longer properly settle on things, and all the human or natural constructions that intercept your gaze seem to some obstacles which merely corrupt the perfect reach of your vision. When you emerge from the desert, your eyes go on trying to create emptiness all around; in every inhabited area, every landscape they see desert beneath, like a watermark. It takes a long time to get back to a normal vision of things and you never succeed completely. Take this substance from my sight! ... But the desert is more than merely a space from which all substance has been removed. Just as silence is not what remains when all noise has been suppressed. There is no need to close your eyes to hear it. For it is also the silence of time.

And even the foreshortening effect of cinema is present in Death Valley, for all this mysterious geology is also a scenario. The American desert is an extraordinary piece of drama, though in some sense it is theatrical like an Alpine landscape, not sentimental like the forest or the countryside. Nor eroded and monotonous like the sub-lunar Australian desert. Nor mystical like the deserts of Islam. It is purely, geologically dramatic, bringing together the sharpest, most ductile shapes with the gentlest, most lascivious underground forms — the whole metamorphosis of the earth's crust is present in synthesis, in a miraculous abridged version. All the intelligence of the earth and its elements gathered together here, in a matchless spectacle: a geological epic. Cinema is not alone in having given us a cinematic vision of the desert. Nature itself pulled off the finest of its special effects here, long before man came on the scene.

It is useless to seek to strip the desert of its cinematic aspects in order to restore its original essence; those features are thoroughly superimposed upon it and will not go away. The cinema has absorbed everything — Indians, mesa, canyons, skies. And yet it is the most striking spectacle in the word. Should we prefer 'authentic' deserts and deep oases? For us
modern, and ultramodern, as for Baudelaire, who knew that the secret of true modernity was to be found in artifice, the only natural spectacle that is really gripping is the one which offers both the most moving profundity and at the same time the total simulacrum of that profundity. As here, where the depth of time is revealed through the (cinematic) depth of field. Monument Valley is the geology of the earth, the mausoleum of the Indians, and the camera of John Ford. It is erosion and it is extermination, but it is also the tracking shot, the movies. All three are mingled in the vision we have of it. And each phase subtly terminates the preceding one. The extermination of the Indians put an end to the natural cosmological rhythm of these landscapes, to which their magical existence was bound for millennia. With the arrival of pioneer civilization an extremely slow process gave way to a much quicker one. But this process itself was overtaken fifty years later by the tracking shots of the cinema which speeded up the process even more and, in a sense, put an end to the disappearance of the Indians by reviving them as extras. Thus this landscape has been witness to all the great events both of geology and anthropology, including some of the most recent. Hence the exceptional scenic qualities of the deserts of the West, combining as they do the most ancestral of hieroglyphs, the most vivid light, and the most total superficiality.

Colours there seem rarefied, detached from all substance, disintegrated into the air, floating on the surface of things. Hence the spectral, ghostly, and at the same time veiled, translucent, calm, and subtle impression made by these landscapes. And the mirage effect — a temporal mixture too — which comes near to total illusion. The rocks, sands, crystals, and cacti are eternal, but they are also ephemeral, unreal, and detached from their substance. The vegetation is minimal, but indestructible, and each new spring sees a miracle of bloom. By contrast, light itself has substance here. Floating like a powder on the air, it gives all shades of colour that pastel nuance that seems the very image of disincarnation, of the separation of the body from the spirit. In this sense, one may speak of the abstraction of the desert, of a deliverance from the organic, a deliverance that is beyond the body's subject passage into carnal inexistence, into that dry, luminous phase of death in which the corruption of the body reaches completion. The desert is beyond this accursed phase of decomposition, this humid phase of the body, this organic phase of nature.

The desert is a sublime form that banishes all sociality, all sentimentality, all sexuality. Words, even when they speak of the desert, are always unwelcome. Careesses have no meaning, except from a woman who is herself of the desert, who has that instantaneous, superficial animality in which the fleshty is combined with dryness and disincarnation. And yet, in another sense, there is nothing to match night falling in its shroud of silence on Desert Valley, seen from broken-down, worn-out motel chairs on the verandah, looking out over the dunes. The heat does not fall off here. Only night falls, its darkness pierced by a few car headlights. And the silence is something extraordinary, as though it were itself all ears. It is not the silence of cold, nor of barrenness, nor of an absence of life. It is the silence of the whole of this heat over the mineral expanses that stretch out before us for hundreds of miles, the silence of the gentle wind upon the salt mud of Badwater, caressing the core deposits of Telegraph Peak. A silence internal to the valley itself, the silence of underwater erosion, below the very wateline of time, as it is below the level of the sea. No animal movement. Nothing dreams here, nothing talks in its sleep. Each night the earth plunges into perfectly calm darkness, into the blackness of its alkaline gestation, into the happy depression of its birth.
Long before I left, I could not get Santa Barbara out of my mind. Santa Barbara is simply a dream and it has in it all the processes of dreams: the weariness, fulfillment of all desires, condensation, displacement, facility of action. All this very quickly becomes unreal. Happy days! This morning a bird came to my balcony to die. I photographed it. But no one is indifferent to his own life and the least event still has something moving about it. I was here in my imagination long before I actually came here. Suddenly this stay has become a sojourn in a previous existence. In the last weeks, time seemed multiplied by a feeling of no longer being there and of living Santa Barbara each day, with its fatal charm and its blandness, as the predestined site of an eternal return.

Things fade into the distance faster and faster in the rear-view mirror of memory. Two and a half months disappear in a few moments, even quicker than the jet lag when your mind readjusts to Europe. It's not easy keeping your sense of wonderment alive or the first flashes of surprise, or even recalling what it felt like when things were still unexpected. Things last no longer than the time it takes for them to happen. It used to be the agreeable custom that you went to see the same film more than once. We are losing that habit. I doubt now whether we really see our whole life flashing before us at the moment of our death. The very possibility of the Eternal Return is becoming precarious: that marvellous perspective presupposes that things unfolded in a necessary, predestined order, the sense of which lies beyond them. There is nothing like that today; things merely follow on in a flabby order that leads nowhere. Today's Eternal Return is that of the infinitely small, the fractal, the obsessive repetition of things on a microscopic and inhuman scale. It is not the exhaustion of a will, nor the sovereign affirmation of an event, nor its consecration by an immutable sign, such as Nietzsche sought, but the viral recurrence of microprocesses. This is, admittedly, inescapable, but no powerful sign presents it to the imagination as predestined (neither nuclear explosions nor viral implosions can be named by the imagination). Such are the events which surround us: microprocessive and simultaneously obliterated.

Coming back from California means re-entering a world you have known and lived in, but doing so without feeling the charm you might expect at returning to a former life. You had left that world behind in the hope it might be thoroughly transformed in your absence, but nothing of the sort has occurred. It got along quite nicely without you and it adjusts quite smoothly to your return. People and things conspire to make it seem as if you had not been away. For my own part, I left it all without regrets and I come back to it again without any great emotion. People are a thousand times more preoccupied with their own little lives than with the strangeness of another world. You are best advised, then, to land discreetly, to come back politely into this world keeping anything you may have to say – along with the few sighs still remaining in your memory – strictly to yourself.

The confrontation between America and Europe reveals not so much a rapprochement as a distortion, an unbridgeable rift. There isn't just a gap between us, but a whole chasm of modernity. You are born modern, you do not become so. And we have never become so. What strikes you immediately in Paris is that you are in the nineteenth century. Coming from Los Angeles, you land back in the 1800s. Every country bears a sort of historical predestination, which almost definitively determines its characteristics. For us, it is the bourgeois model of 1789 – and the interminable decadence of that model – that shapes our landscape. There is nothing we can do about it: everything here revolves around the nineteenth-century bourgeois dream.
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Apocalypse Now
DAVID RIMANELLI ON JEAN BAUDRILLARD’S
“WHAT ARE YOU DOING AFTER THE ORGY?” (1983)

The fascination of the pictures is the fascination of being seduced by a dead object, it is the magic of disappearance, and this particular magic can be found just as easily in pornographic images as in Modern art, where the prevailing obsession has been to literally not be viewable, to defy any and all possibilities of visual seduction.

—Jean Baudrillard, “What Are You Doing After the Orgy?”

IT WAS ANOTHER MOMENT, now impossible to reconstruct, a mix of naïveté and cynicism, philosophy and excess, that spawned Jean Baudrillard’s appearance in these pages during the 1980s. French poststructural theory arrived within this milieu as a reprise from the tyranny of anti-intellectualism—an antidote to, and an extension of, the ideals of the ’60s. Critical discourse, which had previously appealed only to critics and historians, infuriated gossipy conversations and prime-time TV shows. Thinking want along with going to nightclubs in New York City and to Comme des Garçons, where one could buy deceptively chic clothes that fell apart and cost more because of it. Fax machines evinced ecstatic fascination. You put the paper in and it came out somewhere else—it was great! Baudrillard’s writing was the distillation of this ambience. His early observation that Marx’s opposition between use-value and exchange-value had been derailed by the ever-expanding regime of the commodity helped to create the critical space that engendered appropriation and critiques of originality in art; you could hardly go to an opening without discussing simulations and simulacra. Along with a generation of post-60s writers—Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze, called the “incommensurables” by Hélène Cixous for their predilection for “refinement, paradox, and aporia”—he provided the sound track for a period of cultural revelation that was deliciously self-critical.
By publishing in *Artforum*, and in his role as a contributing editor here, Baudrillard acknowledged the position he had come to occupy in the discourse of contemporary art. His two essays for the magazine—“What Are You Doing After the Orgy?” (October 1983) and “Astral America” (September 1984)—took him into a world he had imagined and show him writing on what he projected to be its own terms. In “Astral America,” this simulation of America is conjured via a description of television laugh tracks: “The laughs are inexorable,” he writes. “It’s the sarcastic exhilaration of a puritan culture. Elsewhere the task of laughter, and of pleasure, is left to the spectator. Here, one’s own laugh is carried over to the screen, where it is part of the spectacle, where it can’t be ambiguous; it’s the screen that laughs, the screen that is entertained. All that is left to you is consternation.”

Baudrillard, who was not himself ecstatic, wrote on a typewriter, just as Paul Virilio refuses to fly. And when I traveled to a conference in Seoul with Baudrillard, I discovered he spoke little English, and I was reduced to conversing in my poor schoolgirl French. But in “What Are You Doing After the Orgy?” he immerses himself in the visceral, and foreign, language of America. It starts out really well—the prostitution of an illusion sounds good. I’m all for it. But if I ever become tired of a word, it’s information, and Baudrillard anticipated in decisive ways the explosion of information technologies that were at the time of his writing still for the common reader pure sci-fi; today, they are pure TMZ.com, Pornotopia.com, Ancestry.com, StealMyIdentityPlease.com. Here is where the intervening decades make it difficult to resurrect the visionary aspect of this writing. I can launch a missile from the GPS in my smartphone. Baudrillard never had a smartphone—he probably never had a cell phone. Reading the text now, there’s truth, but it feels like a thin truth—the words ecstatic and hyperreal seem like fake words, like lying. Technology is the only thing I can count on to improve. Baudrillard’s denunciations of archeaic technology are quaint. Quaint, like Playboy pictures. Baudrillard asks: “Are you attracted to them?” Me? To Playboy? Really? They’re not exactly explicit. But I study somewhere, I read that people now relate more to pornography than they do to real sex acts. They prefer it. Because it looks better than what they get in life—and it probably is better because it’s done by professionals. In this context, Baudrillard’s “collective vertigo of neutralization, a forward escape into the obscenity of pure and empty form, unintelligible form, wherein the visible is both lessened and degraded,” sounds prophetic.

Over the course of the essay, Baudrillard addresses increasingly vivid levels of atrocity. First, a crashed plane—340 people killed, only a fraction of whom were visually identifiable. Rather than find obscenity in the disaster itself, he locates it in a then-new technology: the process of gathering the twelve thousand pieces into which the passengers were shredded and scanning them via a computer to establish the identity of the dead. Nowadays, it is more timely to find obscenity and atrocity not in the submission of physical body parts to information processing, but in the submission of human subjectivity to networked systems of capital. Next, the author discusses “sentimental cannibalism.” And the passage is . . . Well, actually, let’s not. Baudrillard’s description is disgusting. It’s real, it’s hyperreal, real hyperrealism—really creepy. “tissu stretches out Renee’s corpse, tries to bite her, but the skin is too resilient.” Call me bourgeois: I simply disapprove. As the essay moves on, there are some awkward moments: The descriptions of female audience members at a male strip club, “obscene because of the sexual spillage evident in their faces,” and of “Marvelous Idi Amin Dada” take Baudrillard to the edge of an abyss he has named America, but they have probably as much to do with his own trips as they do with l’esprit americain. In the end, he pulls back—“Happily we are only playing the comedy of obscenity”—but in the time that has passed the joke has faded. We now know the fascination of being seduced by a dead object. It’s banal. It’s everything you say, Jean Baudrillard, except more, you can’t fathom how much more.

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