JEAN BAUDRILLARD, Art and Artefact

edited by Nicholas Zurbrugg

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1 I refer of course to Richard Hamilton's painting, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (1956).

2 Jean Baudrillard, *Baudrillard Live,* ed. Mike Gane, London: Routledge, 1993, p.166. Henceforth abbreviated as *BL.*

3 Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* [1774], translated by Catherine Hutter, New York: Signet, 1962, p. 31.

4 William Burroughs, 'Just Say No To Drug Hysteria', in *High Risk*, eds Amy Scholder and Ira Silverberg, New York: Plume, 1991, p.73. Henceforth abbreviated as *HR.*

5 Brion Gysin, letter of 15 August 1979, *Stereo Headphones,* no. 8–9–10, 1982, p. 76.

6 Jean Baudrillard, interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg, Brisbane, 22 April 1994. All subsequent unreferenced statements by Baudrillard are from this interview.

7 Gysin, letter of 15 August 1979.

OBJECTS, IMAGES, AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF AESTHETIC ILLUSION

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

Aesthetic disillusionment. It seems that the most contemporary art culminates in an effort of self-deterrence, in a process of mourning the death of the image and the imaginary, in an aesthetic mourning, that cannot succeed anyway, resulting in a general melancholy in the artistic sphere, which seems to survive by recycling its history. (But art and aesthetics are not the only domains devoted to this melancholic and paradoxical destiny – of living beyond their own finalities.)

It seems that we have been assigned to conduct infinite retrospective analyses of what happened before. This is true for politics, history and ethics, and for art as well, which in this matter has no special privilege. All the movement in painting has been displaced towards the past. Employing quotation, simulation, reappropriation, it seems that contemporary art is about to reappropriate all forms or works of the past, near or far – or even contemporary forms – in a more or less ludic or kitsch fashion. What Russell Connor calls 'the abduction of modern art'.

Of course, all of this remaking and recycling claim to be ironic; but this form of irony is like a threadbare piece of cloth – a by-product of disillusion – a fossilized irony. The trick that consists in juxtaposing the nude in Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* with Cézanne's card players is only a publicity stunt, part of the irony, or the *trompe-l'oeil* criticism which characterizes publicity today, and which is about to submerge the artistic world.

It's the irony of repentance and resentment against our own culture. But perhaps repentance and resentment constitute the ultimate phase of art history, just as, according to Nietzsche, they constitute the ultimate

phase in the genealogy of morals. It's a parody, and at the same time a palinody of art and art history, a self-parody of culture in the form of revenge, characteristic of radical disillusion. It's as if art, like history, was recycling its own garbage and looking for its redemption in its own detritus.

Consider, for example, the way certain films (*Barton Fink*, *Basic Instinct*, Greenaway's works, *Sailor and Lula*, etc.) leave no place for criticism because, in some way, they destroy themselves from within. Quotation crazy, prolix, high-tech, they carry with them the cancer of cinema, the internal *excroissance*, proliferation of their own technique, of their own scenography or of their own cinematographic culture. We feel as if these directors were repelled by their own films, that they couldn't stand them (whether through excess of ambition or lack of imagination). Nothing else justifies the orgy of means and the efforts to cancel films through an excess of virtuosity, special effects, megalomaniac angles – the technical harassment of the images – by exhausting their effects to the point of making a sarcastic parody out of it, a veritable pornography of the image. Everything seems to be programmed for the disillusionment of the spectator, for whom no other choice is left than that of enduring this excess of cinema, this end to all cinematic illusion.

What can one say about the cinema, if not that now – almost at the end of its evolution, of its technical progress, from silent movies to talkies, colour, high technology and special effects – its capacity for illusion, in the radical sense of the word, has vanished. Current cinema is no longer related to allusion or illusion; it connects everything in a super-tech, super-efficient, super-visual style. No void, no ellipsis, no silence – nothing more than what you get on television, which film resembles more and more as it loses the specificity of its images. We're going more and more in the direction of high definition, that is to say, towards the useless perfection of the image – which is no longer an image. The more it becomes real, the more it is produced in real time, the more we approach absolute definition, or the realistic perfection of the image, the more the image's power of illusion is lost.

Just remember the Peking Opera, and how with only the movement of two bodies on a vessel, it brings alive the whole space of a river. How two bodies struggling in a duel, avoiding each other, moving near each other without touching, in an invisible copulation, can mime the physical presence of darkness on the stage where this fight takes place. Here the illusion is total and intense, more than aesthetic, a physical ecstasy, because it eludes all realistic presence of the night and the river, and only the bodies assume the natural illusion. Today we would bring tons of real water on to the stage, the duel would be filmed in infra-red and so forth. We confront the misery of the over-technical image, like the Gulf War on CNN. Pornography of the image in three or four

dimensions, or of music what does – always by adding to the real, by adding the real to the real with the objective of obtaining a perfect illusion (that of the perfect realistic stereotype), that we kill profound illusion.

An image is an abstraction of the world in two dimensions. It takes away a dimension from the real world, and by this very fact the image inaugurates the power of illusion. On the other hand, virtuality, by making us *enter* into the image, by recreating a realistic image in three dimensions (and even in adding a sort of fourth dimension to the real, so as to make it in some way hyperreal), destroys this illusion (the equivalent of this operation in time is 'real time', which makes the loop of time close up on itself instantaneously, and thus abolishes all illusion of the past as well as of the future). Virtuality tends toward the perfect illusion. But it isn't the same creative illusion as that of the image. It is a 'recreating' illusion (as well as a recreational one), revivalistic, realistic, mimetic, hologrammatic. It abolishes the game of illusion by the perfection of the reproduction, in the virtual rendition of the real. And so we witness the extermination of the real by its double.

By contrast, *trompe-l'oeil*, by taking away a dimension from real objects, highlights their presence and their magic through the simple unreality of their minimal exactness. *Trompe-l'oeil* is the ecstasy of the real object in its immanent form. It adds to the formal charm of painting the spiritual charm of the lure, the mystification of the senses. For the sublime is not enough, we must have the subtle too, the spirit which consists in reversing the real in its very place. This is what we have unlearned from modernity – subtraction is what gives strength; power emerges from the absence. We produce, we accumulate. And because we can no more assume the symbolic mastery of absence we are plunged today into the inverse illusion, the disenchanted proliferation of screens and the profusion of images.

It is very difficult to speak of painting today because it is very difficult to *see* it. Because generally it no longer wants exactly to be *looked at*, but to be absorbed visually without leaving any traces. In some way modern painting could be characterized as the simplified aesthetic form of the impossible exchange. So that the best discourse about painting would be a discourse where there is nothing to say, which would be the equivalent of a painting where there is nothing to see. The equivalent of an object, the object of art, that isn't an object any more.

However, an object which isn't an object is not nothing. One becomes obsessed by its immanence, its void and its immaterial presence. The problem is to materialize this nothingness, at the very limit of the void, to trace the mark of this void, and within the limits of indifference to play the game according to the mysterious rules of indifference.

Art is never the mechanical reflection of the positive or negative

conditions of the world; it is its exacerbated illusion or hyperbolic mirror. In a world ruled by indifference, art can only add to this indifference, by focusing the void of the image or the object that isn't an object any more. Thus the cinema of Wenders, Jarmusch, Antonioni, Altman, Godard or Warhol explores the insignificance of the world through the image, and by its images contributes to the insignificance of the world – they add to its real or hyperreal illusion. Whereas recent cinema like that of the latest Scorsese, Greenaway, etc. with its high-tech machinery, and its frantic and eclectic agitation, only fills the void of the image, and thus adds to our imaginary disillusion.

Exactly like the Simulationists of New York who, by hypostasizing the simulacrum, are only hypostasizing painting itself as a simulacrum, as a machine defeating itself. In many cases (Bad Painting, New New Painting, installations and performances) painting denies itself, parodies itself, rejects itself. Plasticized, vitrified, frozen excrement, or garbage. It does not even justify a *glance*. It doesn't look at you, and so in turn you don't need to look at it; it is no longer your concern. This painting has become completely indifferent to itself as painting, as art, as illusion more powerful than the real. It doesn't believe any longer in its own illusion, and so it falls into the simulation of itself and into derision.

Abstraction was the great adventure of modern art. In its 'irruptive', primitive and original phase, whether expressionist or geometric, it was still part of an heroic history of painting, of the deconstruction of representation and of the object. By volatilizing its object, the subject of painting itself advanced towards the limits of its own disappearance. By contrast, the forms of contemporary abstraction (and this is true also of the New Figuration) have passed beyond this revolutionary acting out, beyond this act of disappearance – they simply reflect the undifferentiated field of our daily life, the banality of the images which have informed our social practices. The New Abstraction and the New Figuration oppose each other only formally – in fact they both equally retrace the total disincarnation of our world, no longer in its dramatic phase, but in its banal phase.

The abstraction of our world is a matter of fact now, when all the art forms in an indifferent world are assigned to the same indifference. This is neither denigration nor depreciation; it's simply the state of things. Authentic contemporary painting has to be as indifferent to itself as the world is once the essential issues have vanished. Art is generally nothing more than the metalanguage of banality. *Can this anti-dramatic simulation evolve or revolve, or last for ever?* Whatever forms it takes, we are already on the way towards the psychodrama of disappearance and transparency. We must not be lured and trapped by a false continuity in art and the history of art.

To rephrase Benjamin, there is an aura of simulacrum – just as for him there was an aura of the original. There is an authentic form of simulation as well as an inauthentic form of simulation. This may seem paradoxical but it's true. When Warhol painted his Campbell Soups in the 1960s, this was a breakthrough for simulation, and for all modern art. All at once the merchandise-object and the merchandise-sign were raised up to an ironical consecration, which is indeed the only ritual left to us, the ritual of transparency. But when he painted the Soup Boxes in '86, he only reproduced the stereotype of simulation.

In '65 he attacked the concept of originality in an original way. In '86 he reproduced the unoriginal in an unoriginal way. The year 1965 witnessed the aesthetic traumatism of the entry of merchandise into art – in short the geniality of merchandise. The evil genie of merchandise raised a new geniality in art – the genie of simulation. Nothing of this in '86, when the genie of advertising merely illustrated a new phase of merchandise. Once again official art fell back into the cynical and sentimental aestheticization that Baudelaire stigmatized.

Would it be any superior form of irony to do the same thing twenty years later? I don't believe so. I believe in the evil genius of simulation, but I don't believe in its ghost. Or in its cadaver, even in stereo. I know that in a few centuries there will be no difference between a real Pompeiian villa and the Paul Getty museum in Malibu, nor any difference between the French Revolution and its Olympic commemoration in Los Angeles in 1989, but *we* are still referring to this difference.

Here is the dilemma – either simulation is irreversible and there is nothing beyond simulation, in that simulation isn't even an event any more, but is our absolute banality, our everyday obscenity, so that we are now in definitive nihilism, awaiting the future rewriting of all pre-existing forms and also waiting for another unforeseeable event – but from where will it come? Or, on the other hand, there is an art of simulation, an ironic quality that evokes the appearances of the world in order to let them vanish again. If not, art won't be anything other than aesthetic harassment, as so often happens today. We must not add the same to the same, and then to the same again: that is poor simulation. We must expel the same from the same. Each image must take something away from the reality of the world; in each image something must disappear.

But this disappearance must be a challenge, and that's the secret of art and seduction: it must never totally succeed. In art – in contemporary art as well as in classical art – there is a double postulation and thus a double strategy. A compulsion to nothingness and to erase all the traces of the world and reality, along with an inverse resistance to this impulse. According to Michaux, the artist is 'he who resists with all his strength the fundamental impulse to leave no traces'.

Art has become iconoclastic. Modern iconoclasm no longer consists in

breaking images, but in producing images, a profusion of *images where there is nothing to see*. These are literally images which leave no traces. Properly speaking, they are without aesthetic consequence. But, behind each of them, something has disappeared. Here is their secret, if they have one. And here is the secret of simulation. On the horizon of simulation, not only has the real world disappeared, but the very question of its existence no longer makes sense.

This was the very problem of Byzantine iconoclasm. The Iconoclasts were subtle people who pretended to represent God for His greater glory, but who, in reality, simulated God in images, and through this dis-simulated the very problem of His existence. Each image was a pretext to not confront the problem of God's existence. Behind each image in fact, God had disappeared. He was not dead – He had simply disappeared. That is, the problem no longer needed to be raised. The problem of the existence or the non-existence of God was resolved by simulation.

But perhaps it was the strategy of God Himself to disappear behind His images, and perhaps God uses his own images in order to dis-appear, Himself obeying the impulse to leave no traces. Thus the prophecy is realized; we live in a world of simulation, in a world where the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear, and at the same time to mask this disappearance. Art does nothing else. The media today do nothing else. That is why art and the media follow the same course, and often become confused with one another.

Behind the orgy of images something is hidden. The world is hiding behind the profusion of images; perhaps it's another form of illusion, an ironic one. As Canetti suggests in his parable about animals, behind each of them it seems that someone human is hidden and is secretly mocking you.

The illusion which proceeds from the capacity, through the invention of forms, to escape from the real, to oppose another scene to the real one, to pass to the other side of the mirror – the illusion which invents another game with other rules – is now impossible, because images have passed over into things. They are no longer the mirror of reality, they are living in the heart of reality – aliens, no more reflecting, but haunting reality – and have transformed it into hyperreality, where, from screen to screen, the only destiny of the image is the image itself. The image cannot imagine the real any longer, because it has become the real. It can no longer transcend reality, transfigure it, nor dream it, because it has become its own virtual reality.

In virtual reality it's as if things had swallowed their mirrors, and then become transparent to themselves. They no longer have any secret, and they cannot create illusion (because illusion is linked to the secret, to the fact that things are absent from themselves, withdrawing themselves in their own appearances). Nothing remains here but transparency, with

things totally present to themselves in their visibility, in their virtuality, in their perfect transcription (in numerical terms, in the newest tech-nologies), on a screen, on millions of screens, on the horizon of which the real, but also the image, has disappeared. All the utopias of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have, by realizing themselves, expelled the reality out of reality and left us in a hyperreality devoid of sense, since all final perspective has been absorbed, leaving as a residue only a surface without depth. Could it be that technology is the only force today that connects the sparse fragments of the real? But what has become of the constellation of sense? And what about the constellation of the secret?

The end of representation, the end of aesthetics, the end of the image itself in the superficial virtuality of the screen. But here is a perverse and paradoxical effect. It seems that while illusion and utopia have been eradicated by the impact of all our technologies, by virtue of these same technologies, *irony itself has passed into things*. There appears to be a counterpart to the loss of illusion of the world, namely the irruption of *objective irony* in this world. Irony as the universal and spiritual form of the disillusion of the world. Spiritual in the sense of *Witz*, of spirit arising from the very heart of the technical banality of our objects and our images. The Japanese feel a divinity in every industrial object. For us this transcendental feeling is reduced to a little ironic glimmer, but even so it is still a spiritual form. For we pagans and agnostics, irony is all that is left of the sacred.

It's no longer either a subjective irony or a romantic one. It is no longer a function of the subject, a critical mirror where the uncertainty and irrationality of the world is reflected. It is the mirror of the world itself, of this objectal and artificial world around us, wherein is reflected the very absence and transparence of the subject. After the critical function of the subject comes the ironic function of the object. Since they are produced as objects, artefacts, signs, merchandise, things assume an artificial and ironic function by their very presence. No need to project irony into the real world, no need for a distorting mirror to hold up the image of its double.

Our universe has swallowed its double, and it has lost its shadow. The irony of this double breaks through at each moment, in each fragment of our signs, our objects, our images, our models. It is no longer even necessary, as the Surrealists did, to highlight functionality, to confront objects with the absurdity of their function, in a poetic unreality. Objects highlight themselves ironically by themselves, they get out of balance without effort. There is no need to emphasize their artifice or their nonsense. This is all part of their interconnection, of their superfluity (i.e. overfluidity), which creates an effect of parody.

After physics and metaphysics we deal now with a pataphysics of

objects and merchandise, a pataphysics of signs and operations. All things, deprived of their secret and their illusion, are assigned to a radical visibility, to the objective make-believe assigned to publicity. Our world is publicity-oriented in its essence (or rather in its transparence). Such as it is, it is as if it has been invented for advertising, promoting itself for another world. We must not believe that advertising came *after* merchandise. In the heart of merchandise and by extension, at the heart of our entire universe of signs, there is an *evil genie of publicity*, a trickster, who has integrated the buffoonery of merchandise and of its scenery. A genial scriptwriter (perhaps capitalism itself) has involved the world in a phantasmagorical game where we are all fascinated victims and gamblers at the same time.

All objects wish to present themselves today, just as human beings, technical objects, industrial objects, media objects, artefacts of all kinds want to signify, to be seen, to be read, to be recorded, to have their own look, to be photographed. You believe you are taking a photograph for your own pleasure. In fact it's the object that wants to be photographed, and you're only a medium in its reproduction, secretly attracted and motivated by this self-promoting surrounding world. Here is the irony of the situation, what I would like to call the pataphysical irony of the situation.

All metaphysics is in effect swept away by this reversal of situation where the subject is no longer at the origin of the process, and no longer anything but the agent, or the operator, of the objective irony of the world. The subject no longer provides the representation of the world (I will be your mirror!). It is the object that refracts the subject, and subtly, through all our technologies, imposes its presence and its aleatory form. The subject no longer determines the rules of the game. Something happened, like a reversal in the relationship. The power of the object breaks through the game of simulation and simulacra, through the very artifice that we have imposed upon it. Here we see something like an ironic revenge; the object becomes a *strange attractor*. Here we have the limit of aesthetic adventure, of the aesthetic mastery of the world by the subject (but at the same time, the end of the adventure of representation, of the mastery of the world by will and representation). For the object as a strange attractor is no more an aesthetic object. Stripped by technique itself of any secret and illusion, stripped of its origins (since it has been generated by models), stripped of all connotation of sense or judgement of value, the object, exorbitated (i.e. escaped from the orbit of the subject) becomes in some way a *pure object* reintegrating the immediacy, the immanence of earlier forms, before or after the general aestheticization of our culture.

All these artefacts, all these artificial objects and images exercise a form of irradiation, of fascination, upon us. They re-become a kind of

material evidence, like fetishes perhaps, at once completely depersonalized and desymbolized, and yet, of maximal intensity, directly invested as a medium, just as the fetish-object is, without aesthetic mediation. It is here perhaps that our most superficial objects, our most stereotypical ones, assume the power of exorcism like sacrificial masks. Exactly as masks absorb the identity of the actors, of the dancers and of the spectators, they provoke a sort of thaumaturgical (traumaturgical?) vertigo.

Thus all these modern artefacts, from publicity to electronics, from the mediatized to the virtual, objects, images, models, networks, have a function of absorbing the identity of the subject much more than a function of communication or information, as is usually said. Barbara Kruger: WE SHALL BE YOUR FAVOURITE DISAPPEARING ACT!

Thus, very much beyond the aesthetic form, these objects join the aleatory and the vertiginous form of games that Caillois contrasts with games of representation, whether mimetic or aesthetic. Objects, these modern simulacra, thus reflect the society in which we are living as well, a society of paroxysm and exorcism. That is, a place where we have absorbed our own reality and our own identity to the point of vertigo, and where we try to eject it with the same force – where all reality has absorbed its own double – and struggle to expel it at any price.

These banal objects, these technical objects, these virtual objects, thus seem to be the new strange attractors, the new objects beyond aesthetics, transaesthetic – fetish-objects, without signification, without illusion, without aura, without value – the perfect mirror of our radical disillusion of the world. Pure objects, ironical objects, just like Warhol's images.

Andy Warhol worked with any image available, in order to eliminate the imaginary and to make a pure visual product of it. Unconditional simulacrum. Steve Miller (and all those who are reprogramming the video-image, the scientific cliché and the synthesized image 'aesthetically') does exactly the opposite. They make art with anti-art material. They *use* the machine to remake art. He (Warhol) *is* a machine. The true technical metabolism is Warhol; Steve Miller only simulates the machine and he uses technique in order to make illusion. Warhol gives us the very illusion of technique – *technique as radical illusion* – far superior today to that of painting.

In this sense, even a machine can become famous, and Warhol never aspired to anything but this mechanical celebrity, without consequence and without trace. A photogenic celebrity simply related to the demand of everything, of every individual to be seen, and to be selected and acknowledged. That is what Warhol does; he is only the agent for the ironic disappearance of things. He is only the medium for this huge publicity which the world makes for itself through technique, through images, forcing our imagination to surrender, breaking the mirror that we are holding up to it, hypocritically, in order to capture it for our profit.

through images, through technical artefacts of all sorts, of which those of Warhol are the modern ideal-type, it is the world that imposes its discontinuity on us, its fragmentation, its stereophony, its artificial instantaneousness. Evidence of the Warhol machine, this extraordinary machine filtering the material evidence of the world. Warhol's images are not banal because they reflect a banal world, but because they result from the absence of any claim by the subject to be able to interpret the world. They result from the elevation of the image to pure figuration, without the least transfiguration. No transcendence any more, but a potentialization of the sign, which, losing all natural signification, shines in the void with all its artificial splendour. Warhol is the first to introduce modern fetishism, transaesthetic illusion, that of an image as such, without quality, a presence without desire.

But what are modern artists doing, anyway? The artists of the Renaissance believed that they were making religious pictures while in fact they were creating artworks. Are our modern artists, who believe they are producing artworks, not doing something completely different? Could it be that the objects they produce are something completely different from art? Fetish-objects for example, but disenchanted ones, purely decorative objects (Roger Caillois would say: hyperbolic ornaments). Objects that are literally superstitious in the sense that they no longer assume the sublime nature of art nor a belief in art, but which nevertheless keep the idea and superstition of art alive. The same process as sexual fetishism, which is itself sexually disinvolved. The fetishist denies both the reality of sex and sexual pleasure. He doesn't believe in sex, only in the idea of sex (which itself of course is asexual). In the same way we no longer believe in art, but only in the idea of art (which for itself of course is not aesthetic, but ideological).

This is why art, being nothing more than an idea, is now working on ideas. The bottle rack of Duchamp is an idea; the Campbell's box by Warhol is an idea; Yves Klein selling air for a blank cheque in a gallery, this is an idea. All these are ideas, signs, allusions, concepts. This no longer means anything at all; but it signifies anyway. What we call art today seems to witness an unavoidable void. Art is tranvested by ideas, and ideas are tranvested by art. It's our form of transexuality, of transvestism enlarged to the whole field of art and culture. Equally transexual are those kinds of art crossed by an idea, crossed by the empty signs of art, and by the signs of their own disappearance.

All modern art is abstract in the sense that it is crossed by the idea far more than it is crossed by the imagination of forms and substances. All modern art is conceptual in the sense that it fetishizes the concept, the stereotype of a cerebral model of art, exactly as that which is fetishized in merchandise is not the real value, but an abstract stereotype of value.

Dedicated to this fetishist and decorative ideology, art no longer has an existence of its own. In this sense we might say that we are on the way to the disappearance of art as a specific activity. This may lead us either to a reversion of art into technique and pure artisanal quality, possibly transferred into the sphere of electronics, as we can see everywhere today. Or towards a primary ritualism, where everything will be used as an aesthetic gadget, and art will end up as universal kitsch, exactly as religious art in its time ended up as Saint-Sulpicien kitsch. Who knows? Art as such may only have been a parenthesis, a sort of ephemeral luxury of the species. The distressing thing is that this crisis of art will probably last for ever. And the difference between Warhol and all those who comfort themselves in this perpetual crisis is that with Warhol the crisis of art is over and virtually obsolete.

Is there still any aesthetic illusion? And if not, is the way open to a transaesthetic illusion? To a radical one, that of the secret, of seduction, of magic? Is there still, within our hypervisibility, transparence, virtuality, a place for an image? A place for an enigma? A place for the real events of perception, a place for an effective power of illusion, a true strategy of forms and appearances?

Despite the modern mythology of a liberation of forms, we must say that forms and figures cannot be liberated, cannot be free. Our task is not to free them, but to capture them, to make them relate to each other and to generate each other.

Objects whose secret is not in the 'centrifugal' expression of their representative form (or deformation), but on the contrary, in their attraction towards the centre and in their subsequent dispersion into the cycle of metamorphosis. There are two ways of achieving, of going beyond representation: either that of its endless deconstruction where painting looks at itself dying, in a sort of umbilical nostalgia, always reflecting its lost history. Or, simply to give up representation, forgetting all the trouble of interpretation, forgetting the critical violence of sense and counter-sense, in order to join the matrix of the appearance of things and the matrix of the distribution of forms.

This is the very form of illusion, the very concept of playing (*illudere*). Going beyond a form is to pass from one form to another, whereas going beyond an idea is to negate the idea. This second strategy defines the intellectual position of illusion and is often that of modern painting's challenge to the world, whereas the former strategy exemplifies the very principle of illusion for which there is no other destiny of form than the form itself.

In this sense we must have illusionists who know that art and painting are illusion, and are as far from intellectual criticism as from aesthetics properly speaking (which already supposes a discrimination between the beautiful and the ugly). Illusionists who know that all art is

first a form of *trompe-l'oeil*, a 'life trick', just as all theory is a 'sense trick' – *trompe-le-sens*, and that all painting, far from being an expressive version of the world, and thus pretending to veracity, consists in setting up snares in which the supposed reality of the world may be naive enough to become trapped. Just as theories do not consist of having ideas (and thus of flirting with the truth), but consist of setting up traps into which meaning naively falls. Of finding, in short, a form of fundamental seduction.

A dimension beyond aesthetic illusion, which I would call anthropological, in order to designate the generic function of designing the world just as it appears to us long before it makes sense, long before it is interpreted or represented, and long before it becomes real. Not the negative and superstitious illusion of another world. But the positive illusion of *this* world, of the operatic scene of the world, of the symbolic operation of the world, of the vital illusion of appearances about which Nietzsche spoke – *illusion as a primitive scene*, acting and happening long before and much more fundamentally than the aesthetic scene.

The sphere of artefacts goes largely beyond art. The realm of art and aesthetics is that of the conventional management of illusion, of a convention that neutralizes the delirious effects of illusion, which neutralizes illusion as an extreme phenomenon. Aesthetics constitutes a sort of sublimation, a mastery of the radical illusion of the world. Other cultures accepted the evidence of this original illusion by trying to deal with it in a symbolic balance. We, the modern cultures, no longer believe in this illusion of the world, but in its reality (which of course is the last and the worst of illusions). We have chosen to exorcize this illusion through this civilized form of simulacrum, which we call the aesthetic form.

Illusion has no history. Aesthetic form has one. But because it has a history it also has an end, and it may be now that we can see the fall, the failure, the fading of this conditional form, of this aesthetic form of the simulacrum – in favour of the unconditional simulacrum, that is, of the primitive scene of illusion, where we may join again with the rituals and phantasmagories of symbolic cultures, and with the fatality of the object.

2

AESTHETIC ILLUSION AND VIRTUAL REALITY

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

There is always a camera hidden somewhere. It may be a real one – we may be filmed without knowing it. We may also be invited to replay our own life on a television network. Anyway, *the virtual camera is in our head*, and our whole life has taken on a video dimension. We might believe that we exist in the original, but today this original has become an exception for the happy few. Our own reality doesn't exist any more. We are exposed to the instantaneous retransmission of all our facts and gestures on a channel. We would have experienced this before as police control. Today it is just like an advertising promotion.

Thus it is irrelevant to get upset with talk shows or reality shows, and to criticize them as such. For they are only a spectacular version, and so an innocent one, of the transformation of life itself, of everyday life, into virtual reality. We don't need the media to reflect our problems in real time – *each existence is telepresent to itself*.

TV and the media have left their mediatized space in order to invest 'real' life from the inside, infiltrating it exactly like a virus in a normal cell.

We don't need digital gloves or a digital suit. As we are, we are moving around in the world as in a synthetic image. We have swallowed our microphones and headsets, producing intense interference effects, due to the short-circuit of life and its technical diffusion. We have interiorized our own prosthetic image and become the professional showmen of our own lives. Compared with this, the reality shows are only side-effects, and moreover mystifying, because in indicting them as manipulation, the critics assume that there is somewhere an original form of life, and that reality shows would be no more than its parody and simulation (Disneyland).

This criticism is over, as is every Situationist criticism of the 'spectacle' and the concept of 'spectacle', as also in substance all criticism of 'alienation'. Unfortunately, I would add. Because the human abstraction of the spectacle was never hopeless; it always offered the chance of disalienation. Whereas the operation of the world in real time, its unconditional realization, is really without alternative. Radicality has changed, and all negative criticism, surviving itself, actually helps its object to survive. For instance, the critic of religion and of its official manifestation misses the fact that religion is in practice far more realized in many other forms – irreligious, profane, political or cultural – where it is less easily recognizable as such.

It is the same thing with the virtual. Current criticism engaging with new techniques, new images, masks the fact that its concept has been distilled throughout real life, in homoeopathic doses, beyond detection. And if the level of reality decreases from day to day, it's because the medium itself has passed into life, and become a common ritual of transparency. It is the same for the virtual: all this digital, numerical and electronic equipment is only the epiphenomenon of the virtualization of human beings in their core. If this can overwhelm people's fantasy to such a degree, it is because we are already, not in some other world, but in this very life, in a state of photosynthesis. If we can today produce a virtual clone to replace Richard Bohringer, it is because he has already replicated himself, he has already become his own clone.

But anyway the reality show can be used as a micromodel for the analysis of all virtual reality. Whether it's the immediacy of information on all screens, the telepresence, or presence on TV, in all actings and happenings, it is always a question of 'real time' – of the collapse of the real and its double. Live your life in real time (live and die directly on the screen). Think in real time (your thinking is immediately transferred on the printer). Make your revolution in real time (not in the street, but in the broadcasting studio). Live your love and passion in real time (by videotaping each other).

This conversion of the mediatized into the immediatized, that is, into an immediate catalytic operation of the real by the screen, this immediatic revolution is already implied in McLuhan's formula 'The Medium is the Message', which has never been analysed in all its consequences. McLuhan remains the prophetic theoretician of this collapse of the medium and the message, and thus in some way the prophet of the vanishing process of information and communication (whose significance he emphasized at the same time!). 'The Medium is the Message' remains as the *Mene Tekel Epharsim* of the communication era, its password and the sign of its end.

But there is another predecessor for all technologies of the virtual: it is the ready-made. Again, for example, the reality show: all those human beings, literally extracted from their real life to play out their AIDS or conjugal psychodrama on the TV screen have their prototype in the bottle rack of Duchamp. The artist extracted the bottle rack from the real world in the same way, displaced it on another level to confer on it an undefinable hyperreality. A paradoxical acting-out, putting an end to the bottle rack as a real object, to art as the invention of another scene and to the artist as the protagonist of another world. To all aesthetic idealization Duchamp opposes a violent desublimation of art and of the real by their instantaneous short-circuit. Extremization of the two forms: the bottle rack, ex-inscribed from its context, from its idea, from its function, becomes more real than the real (hyperreal), and more art than art (it enters into the transaesthetics of banality, of insignificance, of nullity, where today the pure and indifferent form of art is to be seen).

Any object, any individual, any situation today could be a virtual ready-made. For all of them might be described in much the same way as Duchamp implicitly categorizes his ready-made object: 'It exists, I met it!' This is the only label for existence. Graffiti – another form of ready-made – says nothing other than: 'I exist, here I am, my name is so and so'. The pure and minimal form of identity: 'I exist, I met myself'. The ready-made always seems like these stuffed animals, vitrified as if they were alive, hypnotized in the pure form of appearance – 'naturalized'. But I would say that today art in general also looks like a naturalized species, vitrified in its pure formal essence.

Duchamp's coup has since been repeated indefinitely, not only in the field of art, but in all individual and social functions, especially in the mediasphere. The last phase being precisely the reality show, where everybody is invited to present themselves as they are, key in hand, and to play their live show on the screen (with all its obscene connotations), just as the ready-made object plays its hyperrealistic role on the screen of the museum.

All these mediatic events relate to this crucial phase in the world of information and communication – a phase that art, politics and production have known before. The drama of the mediatic class is that it is starving on the other side of the screen, in front of an indifferent consuming mass, in front of the tele-absence of the masses. Any form of tele-presence will be good enough to exorcize this tele-absence. Just as it was a vital necessity for capital to have workers and producers transformed into active consumers, and even into direct stockholders in the capitalist economy (this doesn't change anything in business, the strategy being as always to remove the tablecloth without changing the organization of the table), the telespectator has to be transferred not in front of the screen where he is staying anyway, passively escaping his responsibility as citizen, but on the screen, on the other side of the screen. In short, he must undergo the same conversion as Duchamp's bottle rack,

when it was transferred to the other side of art, thus creating a definitive ambiguity between art and the real world. Today art is nothing more than this paradoxical confusion of the two. And information too is nothing more than the paradoxical confusion of the event and the medium, including all forms of intoxication and mystification connected to it.

So we have all become ready-mades. Objects transposed to the other side of the screen, mediumized (we don't even enjoy the good old status of passive spectator any more), hypostasized as if transfigured *in situ*, on the spot, by aesthetic or mediatic decision, transfigured in their specific habits and ways of life, as living museum exhibits. Thus we become cloned to our own image by high definition, and dedicated by involution into our own image to mediatic stupefaction, just as the ready-made is dedicated to aesthetic stupefaction. And just as Duchamp's acting-out opens on an overall aestheticization, where any piece of junk will be promoted to a piece of art, and any piece of art demoted to a piece of junk – so this immediatic conversion opens on to a universal virtuality, that is to say the radical actualization of reality through its acting-out in real time.

All cultural spaces are involved. For example, some new museums, following a sort of Disneyland processing, try to put people not so much in front of the painting – which is not interactive enough and even suspect as pure spectacular consumption – but into the painting. Insinuated audiovisually into the virtual reality of the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, people will enjoy it in real time, feeling and tasting the whole Impressionist context, and eventually interacting with the picture. The masses usually prefer passive roles, and avoid representation. This must change, and they must be made interactive partners. It is not a question of free speaking or free acting – just break their resistance and destroy their immunities.

It is a question of life and death. When the indifference of the masses becomes dangerous for the political or cultural class, then interactive strategies must be invented to exhort a response at any price. In fact, the interactive mass is still a mass, with all the characteristics of a mass, simply reflecting itself on both sides of the screen. But the screen is not a mirror, and, while there was some magic in passing beyond the mirror, there is no magic at all in passing beyond the screen. It's impossible anyway – there is no other side of the screen. No depth – just a surface. No hidden face – just an interface.

Besides, the masses were not without an answer. Their answer was silence, the silence of the silent majorities. This challenge of silence is now cancelled when people are forced to ask their own questions, when they are assigned to speech. If they had some questions, these would never be autonomous but would surely be programmed in a

schedule. But even this implication *en trompe l'oeil* doesn't save media and information from inertia, from proliferating fatal inertia. Mass media or micromedia, directive or interactive, the chain reaction of the images is the same. It is simply materialized in real time and in everybody's head.

Now what exactly is at stake in this hegemonic trend towards virtuality? What is the idea of the virtual? It would seem to be the radical actualization, the unconditional realization, of the world, the transformation of all our acts, of all historical events, of all material substance and energy into pure information. The ideal would be the resolution of the world by the actualization of all facts and data.

This is the theme of Arthur C. Clarke's fable about the names of God. In this fable, the monks of Tibet devote themselves to the fastidious work of transcribing the 99 billion names of God, after which the world will be accomplished, and it will end. Exhausted by this everlasting spelling of the names of God, they call IBM computer experts who complete the work in a few months. This offers a perfect allegory of the completion of the world in real time by the operation of the virtual. Unfortunately this is also the end of the world in real time. For with this virtual countdown of the names of God, the great promise of the end was realized; and the technicians of IBM, who left the site after work (and didn't believe of course in the prophecy), saw the stars in the sky fading and vanishing one by one.

Maybe it is an allegory of our technical transfiguration of the world: its accelerated end, its anticipated resolution – the final score of modern millenarianism, but without hope of salvation, revelation, or even apocalypse. Simply accelerating the process of declining (in the double sense of the word) towards a pure and simple disappearance. The human species would be invested, without knowing it, with the task of programming, by exhausting all its possibilities, the code *for the automatic disappearance of the world.*

Rather than the ideal transformation of the world, the ultimate end of this transfiguration would be that of building a perfectly autonomous world from which we can retire and remove ourselves. In order for us to step out of it, the world must be brought to completion. As long as we stay here as alien beings, the world cannot be perfect. And to be perfect it must be constructed and artificial, because there is no perfection in the natural state. The human being itself is a dangerous imperfection. If we want to achieve this sort of immortality, we must also treat ourselves as artefacts and get out of ourselves in order to move on an artificial orbit, where we can revolve eternally.

We all dream of an *ex-nihilo* creation, of a world emerging and moving without our intervention. We dream of perfect autonomous beings who, far from acting against our will as in the fable, *The Sorcerer's*

Apprentice, would meet our desire to escape our own will, and realize the world as a self-fulfilling prophecy. So we dream of perfect computers, of auto-programming artificial intelligence. But if we allow artificial beings to become intelligent, and even more intelligent than we are, we don't allow them to have their own will. We don't allow them what God finally allowed us – the intelligence of evil. We cannot bear real challenge from another species; and if we concede intelligence to other beings, then this intelligence must still be the manifestation of our desire. While God permitted us to raise such questions about our own liberty, we don't allow artificial beings to raise such questions about themselves. No liberty, no will, no desire, no sexuality. We want them complex, creative, interactive, but without spirit. By the way, it seems that these 'intelligent' machines have found, if not the way to transgression and freedom, at least the byways to accident and catastrophe. It seems that they have an evil genius for dysfunctions, electronic viruses and other perverse effects, which save them – and us, in the same way – from perfection and from reaching the limit of their possibilities.

The perfect crime would be to build a world-machine without defect, and to leave it without traces. But it never succeeds. We leave traces everywhere – viruses, lapses, germs, catastrophes – signs of defect, or imperfection, which are like our species' signature in the heart of an artificial world.

All forms of high technology illustrate the fact that behind its doubles and its prostheses, its biological clones and its virtual images, the human species is secretly fomenting its disappearance. For example, the video cassette recorder connected to the TV: it sees the film in your place. Were it not for this technical possibility of devolution, of a vicarious accomplishment, we would have felt obliged to see it for ourselves. For we always feel a little responsible for films we haven't seen, for desires we haven't realized, for people we haven't answered, for crimes we haven't committed, for money we haven't spent. All this generates a mass of deferred possibilities, and the idea that a machine is there that can deal with these possibilities, can stock them, filter them (an answer-machine, a memory bank), and progressively absorb and reabsorb them, is very comforting. All these machines can be called virtual, since they are the medium of virtual pleasure, the abstract pleasure of the image, which is often good enough for our happiness. Most of these machines are used for delusion, for the elusion of communication ('Leave a message . . .'), for absolving face-to-face relations and social responsibilities. They don't really lead to action, they substitute for it most of the time. So with the film on the video cassette recorder: maybe I'll see this film later, but maybe I won't do it at all. Am I sure I really want to see it anyway? But the machine must work. Thus the consumption of the machine converges with the consumption of the desire.

All these machines are wonderful. They give us a sort of freedom. They help us to get free from the machine itself, since they interconnect one with another and function in a loop. They help us to get free from our own will and from our own production. What a relief all at once to see twenty pages erased by a caprice of the word processor (or by an error of the user, which amounts to the same thing). They would never have had such a value if they hadn't been given the chance to disappear! What the computer gives to you, too easily perhaps, it takes away just as easily. Everything is in order. The technological equation amounts to zero. We always hear about negative perverse effects. But here the technique assumes a positive (homoeopathic) perverse effect. The integrated circuit reverses itself, performing in some way *the automatic writing of the world*.

Now let us consider some different aspects of this virtual achievement, of this automatic writing of the world. High definition. High fidelity. Real time. Genetic codes. Artificial intelligence.

In high definition, the (electronic, numerical or synthesized) image is nothing more than the emanation of the digital code that generated it. It has nothing more to do with representation, and even less with aesthetic illusion. All illusion is abolished by technical perfection. It is the same with the three-dimensional image: it is a pure disillusion, since the magic of the image lies simply in the subtraction of one dimension from the real world. In the hologram's perfection of the virtual image, all parts are microscopically identical to the whole, generating a fractal deconstruction of the image, which is supplanted by its own pure luminous definition.

High fidelity. Disappearance of the music by excess of fidelity, by the promiscuity of the music and its absolute technical model. Holographic music, holophonic, stereophonic, as if it had swallowed its own genetic code before expelling it as an artificial synthesis – clinical music, sterile, purged of all noise.

Real time. The equivalent of high definition for the image. Simultaneity of the event and its diffusion in information. Instant proximity of oneself and one's actions at a distance. Telepresence: you can manage your business *in situ* at the other end of the world, by the medium of your electronic clone. Like the space of the image in high definition, each moment in real time is microscopically coded, microscopically isolated, in a closed and integrated circuit. As in the hologram, each parcel of time concentrates the total information relative to the event, as if we could control the event from all sides at once. No distance, no memory, no continuity, no death: the extreme 'reality of time' is in fact extreme virtuality. All the suspense, all the unforeseeability, of time is over.

Genetic coding. What is at stake here is the simulation of a perfect human being, of a body of high definition, through the controlled

engineering and dispatching of the genome. The construction of a virtual body outperforming the original – plastic genetic surgery. The genetic code itself, the DNA, which concentrates the whole definition of any living being in a minimal space and a minimal formula, is the ideal type of virtuality.

Last, but not least: artificial intelligence. Something like an artificial brain-recording, adapted to an artificial environment. Thinking almost instantaneously inscribed on the screen, in direct interaction with data, software and memories – intelligence in real time. Thinking becomes a high definition operation, suppressing all distance, all ambiguity, all enigmatic eventualities, suppressing the very illusion of thought. Just as the illusion of the image disappears into its virtual reality, just as the illusion of the body disappears into its genetic inscription, just as the illusion of the world disappears into its technical artefacts, so the natural intelligence of the world disappears into its artificial intelligence. There is no trace in all of this of the world as a game, as a fake, as a machination, as a crime, and not as a logical mechanism, or a reflex cybernetic machine, with the human brain as mirror and model.

Artificial intelligence is everything except artificial. It is definitive 'realthinking' (as we speak of *realpolitik*), fully materialized by the interaction of all virtualities of analysis and computing. We could even say that artificial intelligence goes beyond itself through too high a definition of the real, through a delirious sophistication of data and operations – but this is only the consequence of the fact that artificial intelligence is a matter of the hyperrealization of thinking, of the objective processing of thinking.

There is not the slightest sense here of illusion, artifice, seduction, or a more subtle game of thought. For thought is neither a mechanism of higher functions nor a range of operational reflexes. It is a rhetoric of forms, of moving illusions and appearances. It reacts positively to the illusion of the world, and negatively to its reality. It plays off appearances against reality, turning the illusion of the world against the world itself. The thinking machine masters only the computing process. It doesn't rule over appearances, and its function, like that of all other cybernetic and virtual machines, is to destroy this essential illusion by counterfeiting the world in real time.

Curiously, all the above traits rely upon paradoxes. 'Real time' is in fact a purely virtual time. 'Artificial intelligence' is nothing like artificial. 'Virtual reality' is at the antipodes of the real world. As for 'high definition', it is synonymous with the *highest dilution* of reality. The highest definition of the medium corresponds to the lowest definition of the message. The highest definition of information corresponds to the lowest definition of the event. The highest definition of sex (in pornography) corresponds to the lowest definition of desire. The highest

definition of language (as computer coding) corresponds to the lowest definition of sense. The highest definition of the other (as computer coding), corresponds to the lowest definition of exchange and alterity. Everywhere high definition corresponds to a world where referential substance is scarcely to be found any more.

Such are the stakes involved in the virtual realization of the world. And we must take it as irreversible. This logic leads to the end, to the final solution, or resolution. Once performed, it would be the equivalent of a perfect crime. While the other crime, the 'original' crime, is never perfect, and always leaves traces – we as living and mortal beings are a living trace of this criminal imperfection – future extermination, which would result from the absolute determination of the world and of its elements, would leave no traces at all. We would not even have the choice or chance to die, to really die. We would have been kidnapped and disintegrated in real time and virtual reality long before the stars go out.

Artificial intelligence, tele-sensoriality, virtual reality and so on – all this is the end of illusion. The illusion of the world – not its analytical countdown – the wild illusion of passion, of thinking, the aesthetic illusion of the scene, the psychic and moral illusion of the other, of good and evil (of evil especially, perhaps), of true and false, the wild illusion of death, or of living at any price – all this is volatilized in psycho-sensorial telereality, in all these sophisticated technologies which transfer us to the virtual, to the contrary of illusion: to radical disillusion.

Fortunately, all this is impossible. High definition is 'virtually' unrealizable, in its attempt to produce images, sounds, information, bodies in microvision, in stereoscopy, as you have never seen them, as you will never see them. Unrealizable also is the fantasy of artificial intelligence. It is too intelligent, too operational to be true – this brain-becoming of the world, this world-becoming of the brain, as it has never functioned, without a body, autonomized, inhuman – a brain of high definition outlining a universe of high definition. Something like an ethical and technical purification. It will never succeed, fortunately. Not that we trust in human nature or in a future enlightenment, but because there is in fact no place for both natural and artificial intelligence. There is no place for both the illusion of the world and a virtual programming of the world. There is no place for both the world and its double.

When the virtual operation of the world is finished, when all the names of God have been spelled out – which is the same basic fantasy as the declining of the human genome or the worldwide declining of all data and information – then we too shall see the stars fading away.