

Qui est l'écran?

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Jean Baudrillard *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact* New York: Berg Publishers, 2005. 208 pages, \$15.95 (paperback), ISBN 1-84520-334-8

Last year, at the age of 77, Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum decelerated beyond departure. In commemoration, it seems appropriate to revisit *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, a distillation of some of his last work. Astutely translated by Chris Turner, this amalgam of gnomic diagnoses not only offer controversial takes on fourth order simulacra but also a refreshing exposé of our fixation with good and evil.

To (dis)orientate ourselves, let us begin with Borges's story of an imperial map, a representation produced to such detail that it ended up coming into one-to-one correspondence with the actual territory. Eventually, the map covered up the very things its design represented and everything that had once been directly lived. The technical saturation of life transposed the incomprehensibility of the world, forcing the whole of the real into the transparency of visual resemblance. This "integral reality" hermetically enveloped the world and its image. To take the story further, as the empire declines, the map fades into the landscape and there is neither the representation nor the real remaining, merely the hyperreal. The prevailing logic of such a totalizing representation is to perfect itself by consuming all opposition. A pattern of "total positivity" spreads like a viral desert and leads to a relentless concentration of all the forces of 'good' in order to eliminate 'evil' from the world.

This tale reframes Marshall McLuhan's cogito "the medium is the message" into a trenchant critique of media-driven consumer society. If we are the product of our technology then the primary effect of the latter is to abolish "elsewhere" by viewing all systems, except itself, as relative. Yet, contra McLuhan's techno-optimism of virtual communities, Baudrillard realises that any particularity trying to totalise itself is bad news. Baudrillard exposes how this process shifts the mode of reciprocal human experience, abolishing the symbolic side of social existence. Based on sign exchange value, the semiotic form's power to stand for or to simulate disconnects the essential play of the symbolic form's meaning and relations and replaces them with the perfecting fractal logic of filtered and fragmented sign materials. The offer of complete disclosure tricks human consciousness into detaching from any real emotional engagement in exchange for artificial s(t)imulation, endless reproductions of fundamentally empty appearance. As a result, meaning and relations become relations of consumption, relations with (and ultimately between) signs. The fractal dimensions of which replicate in dynamic continuum at smaller and larger scales. That is to say, whatever the scale of the map the shape is about the same, a repeating space-time manifold. By analogy, one can view modern mediatised geopolitics and economic networks as fractal.

Under an avalanche of information, we experience an encounter with hyperreality, not through too little reality but rather through a surfeit, one that lacks all the defining features of actual presence. As we are sedated by a diet of glut, repetition and endless consumption, habit snares us in a chimerical web of para-social interaction. We abrogate our responsibility to ask questions about our own modes of thought. In the meantime, reality begins to de-actualise in the geography of a hyperreal self-scape as we forget the symbolic side to social existence. Apathy descends on our own human faculties to explore an authentic plurality of life-worlds, congealing us within an increasingly semiotic simulacrum. The entropic heat-death of all symbolic relations (as the borders of the real) yield to an "ecstasy of communication."

But does the absorption of images make us victims of images? Are we a media overwritten by those who speak for it? According to Baudrillard, we happily collaborate in obtaining everything we desire but remain insatiate. Disturbingly, knowing and receiving everything we want comes at the expense of any sort of symbolic cycle. Although artifice is always at the very heart of reality, without the former's relationship of reciprocity, reversibility and interconnectedness to provide context and perspective, what we think is real ends up being a simulation of reality capable of thinking us rather than vice-versa. This makes us accomplices in the transformation of ourselves into images, "double agents of the virtual" so to speak. As

such, the violence done to the image including the image of humanity appears to be the experiment humanity is willing to conduct on itself. On the other hand, Baudrillard envisages integral reality's "unlimited operational project" as an unsuspecting propagator of its own reaction. Despite all its seduction, reversibility always haunts this projection into the desire of others, an immanent paroxysm awaiting arrival as an image feedback.

Whether Baudrillard's work has meaning or not is not really for me to answer and somehow misses the point. Yet, to encounter it is still extreme sport: exhilarating, dangerous and liable to produce vertigo. Baudrillard's *ça ira* is akin to a "force-five conceptual storm." His epistemological project was, after all, to free us to go beyond our ill equipped thought about the world and keep pace with its accelerating forms, a radicaliser of hypotheses and an unwavering agent provocateur to the last. And whilst his critique remains ambiguous and contradictory, it is nonetheless telling. The impact is considerably unnerving but seemingly necessary and affirming: sympathy for the devil indeed.

Jean Baudrillard, philosopher and sociologist, born July 29 1929; died March 6 2007 ■

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