Radical	Thinkers	•
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Jean Baudrillard The Transparency of Evil Essays on Extreme Phenomena

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PART I

Since the world is on a delusional course, we must adopt a delusional standpoint towards the world.

Better to die from extremes than starting from the extremities.

After the Orgy

If I were asked to characterize the present state of affairs, I would describe it as 'after the orgy'. The orgy in question was the moment when modernity exploded upon us, the moment of liberation in every sphere. Political liberation, sexual liberation, liberation of the forces of production, liberation of the forces of destruction, women's liberation, children's liberation, liberation of unconscious drives, liberation of art. The assumption of all models of representation, as of all models of anti-representation. This was a total orgy – an orgy of the real, the rational, the sexual, of criticism as of anti-criticism, of development as of the crisis of development. We have pursued every avenue in the production and effective overproduction of objects, signs, messages, ideologies and satisfactions. Now everything has been liberated, the chips are down, and we find ourselves faced collectively with the big question: WHAT DO WE DO NOW THE ORGY IS OVER?

Now all we can do is simulate the orgy, simulate liberation. We may pretend to carry on in the same direction, accelerating, but in reality we are accelerating in a void,

because all the goals of liberation are already behind us, and because what haunts and obsesses us is being thus ahead of all the results – the very availability of all the signs, all the forms, all the desires that we had been pursuing. But what can we do? This is the state of simulation, a state in which we are obliged to replay all scenarios precisely because they have all taken place already, whether actually or potentially. The state of utopia realized, of all utopias realized, wherein paradoxically we must continue to live as though they had not been. But since they have, and since we can no longer, therefore, nourish the hope of realizing them, we can only 'hyper-realize' them through interminable simulation. We live amid the interminable reproduction of ideals, phantasies, images and dreams which are now behind us, yet which we must continue to reproduce in a sort of inescapable indifference.

The fact is that the revolution has well and truly happened, but not in the way we expected. Everywhere what has been liberated has been liberated so that it can enter a state of pure circulation, so that it can go into orbit. With the benefit of a little hindsight, we may say that the unavoidable goal of all liberation is to foster and provision circulatory networks. The fate of the things liberated is an incessant commutation, and these things are thus subject to increasing indeterminacy, to the principle of uncertainty.

Nothing (not even God) now disappears by coming to an end, by dying. Instead, things disappear through proliferation or contamination, by becoming saturated or transparent, because of extenuation or extermination, or as a result of the epidemic of simulation, as a result of their transfer into the secondary existence of simulation. Rather than a mortal mode of disappearance, then, a fractal mode of dispersal.

Nothing is truly reflected any more — whether in a mirror or in the abyssal realm (which is merely the endless reduplication of consciousness). The logic of viral dispersal in networks is no longer a logic of value; neither, therefore, is it a logic of equivalence. There is no longer any such thing as a revolution of values — merely a circumvention or involution of values. A centripetal compulsion coexists with a decentredness of all systems, an internal metastasis or fevered endogenic virulence which creates a tendency for systems to explode beyond their own limits, to override their own logic — not in the sense of creating sheer redundancy, but in the sense of an increase in power, a fantastic potentialization whereby their own very existence is put at risk.

All of which brings us back to the fate of value. Once, out of some obscure need to classify, I proposed a tripartite account of value: a natural stage (use-value), a commodity stage (exchange-value), and a structural stage (sign-value). Value thus had a natural aspect, a commodity aspect, and a structural aspect. These distinctions are formal ones, of course - reminiscent of the distinctions between the particles physicists are always coming up with. A new particle does not replace those discovered earlier: it simply joins their ranks, takes its place in a hypothetical series. So let me introduce a new particle into the microphysics of simulacra. For after the natural, commodity, and structural stages of value comes the fractal stage. The first of these stages had a natural referent, and value developed on the basis of a natural use of the world. The second was founded on a general equivalence, and value developed by reference to a logic of the commodity. The third is governed by a code, and value develops here by reference to a set of models. At the fourth, the fractal (or viral, or radiant) stage of value,

there is no point of reference at all, and value radiates in all directions, occupying all interstices, without reference to anything whatsoever, by virtue of pure contiguity. At the fractal stage there is no longer any equivalence, whether natural or general. Properly speaking there is now no law of value, merely a sort of epidemic of value, a sort of general metastasis of value, a haphazard proliferation and dispersal of value. Indeed, we should really no longer speak of 'value' at all, for this kind of propagation or chain reaction makes all valuation impossible. Once again we are put in mind of microphysics: it is as impossible to make estimations between beautiful and ugly, true and false, or good and evil, as it is simultaneously to calculate a particle's speed and position. Good is no longer the opposite of evil, nothing can now be plotted on a graph or analysed in terms of abscissas and ordinates. Just as each particle follows its own trajectory, each value or fragment of value shines for a moment in the heavens of simulation, then disappears into the void along a crooked path that only rarely happens to intersect with other such paths. This is the pattern of the fractal - and hence the current pattern of our culture.

When things, signs or actions are freed from their respective ideas, concepts, essences, values, points of reference, origins and aims, they embark upon an endless process of self-reproduction. Yet things continue to function long after their ideas have disappeared, and they do so in total indifference to their own content. The paradoxical fact is that they function even better under these circumstances.

Thus, for example, the idea of progress has disappeared, yet progress continues. The idea of wealth that production once connoted has disappeared, yet production itself continues more vigorously than ever. Indeed, it picks up speed

precisely in proportion to its increasing indifference to its original aims. Of the political sphere one can say that the idea of politics has disappeared but that the game of politics continues in secret indifference to its own stakes. Of television, that it operates in total indifference to its own images (it would not be affected, in other words, even were mankind to disappear). Could it be that all systems, all individuals, harbour a secret urge to be rid of their ideas, of their own essences, so as to be able to proliferate everywhere, to transport themselves simultaneously to every point of the compass? In any event, the consequences of a dissociation of this kind can only be fatal. A thing which has lost its idea is like the man who has lost his shadow, and it must either fall under the sway of madness or perish.



Transaesthetics

We see Art proliferating wherever we turn; talk about Art is increasing even more rapidly. But the soul of Art - Art as adventure, Art with its power of illusion, its capacity for negating reality, for setting up an 'other scene' in opposition to reality, where things obey a higher set of rules, a transcendent figure in which beings, like line and colour on a canvas, are apt to lose their meaning, to extend themselves beyond their own raison d'être, and, in an urgent process of seduction, to rediscover their ideal form (even though this form may be that of their own destruction) - in this sense, Art is gone. Art has disappeared as a symbolic pact, as something thus clearly distinct from that pure and simple production of aesthetic values, that proliferation of signs ad infinitum, that recycling of past and present forms, which we call 'culture'. There are no more fundamental rules, no more criteria of judgement or of pleasure. In the aesthetic realm of today there is no longer any God to recognize his own. Or, to use a different metaphor, there is no gold standard of aesthetic judgement or pleasure. The situation resembles that of a currency which may not be exchanged:

it can only float, its only reference itself, impossible to convert into real value or wealth.

Art, too, must circulate at top speed, and is impossible to exchange. 'Works' of art are indeed no longer exchanged, whether for each other or against a referential value. They no longer have that secret collusiveness which is the strength of a culture. We no longer read such works – we merely decode them according to ever more contradictory criteria.

Nothing in this sphere conflicts with anything else. Neo-Geometrism, Neo-Expressionism, New Abstraction, New Representationalism – all coexist with a marvellous facility amid general indifference. It is only because none of these tendencies has any soul of its own that they can all inhabit the same cultural space; only because they arouse nothing but profound indifference in us that we can accept them all simultaneously.

The art world presents a curious aspect. It is as though art and artistic inspiration had entered a kind of stasis – as though everything which had developed magnificently over several centuries had suddenly been immobilized, paralysed by its own image and its own riches. Behind the whole convulsive movement of modern art lies a kind of inertia, something that can no longer transcend itself and has therefore turned in upon itself, merely repeating itself at a faster and faster rate. On the one hand, then, a stasis of the living form of art, and at the same time a proliferative tendency, wild hyperbole, and endless variations on all earlier forms (the life, moving of itself, of that which is dead). All this is logical enough: where there is stasis, there is metastasis. When a living form becomes disordered, when (as in cancer) a genetically determined set of rules ceases to function, the cells begin to proliferate chaotically. Just as some biological disorders indicate a break in the genetic code, so the present

disorder in art may be interpreted as a fundamental break in the secret code of aesthetics.

By its liberation of form, line, colour, and aesthetic notions – as by its mixing up of all cultures, all styles – our society has given rise to a general aestheticization: all forms of culture – not excluding anti-cultural ones – are promoted and all models of representation and anti-representation are taken on board. Whereas art was once essentially a utopia – that is to say, ultimately unrealizable – today this utopia has been realized: thanks to the media, computer science and video technology, everyone is now potentially a creator. Even anti-art, the most radical of artistic utopias, was realized once Duchamp had mounted his bottle-dryer and Andy Warhol had wished he was a machine. All the industrial machinery in the world has acquired an aesthetic dimension; all the world's insignificance has been transfigured by the aestheticizing process.

It is often said that the West's great undertaking is the commercialization of the whole world, the hitching of the fate of everything to the fate of the commodity. That great undertaking will turn out rather to have been the aestheticization of the whole world – its cosmopolitan spectacularization, its transformation into images, its semiological organization. What we are witnessing, beyond the materialist rule of the commodity, is a semio-urgy of everything by means of advertising, the media, or images. No matter how marginal, or banal, or even obscene it may be, everything is subject to aestheticization, culturalization, museumification. Everything is said, everything is exposed, everything acquires the force, or the manner, of a sign. The system runs less on the surplus-value of the commodity than on the aesthetic surplus-value of the sign.

There is much talk of a dematerialization of art, as evidenced, supposedly, by minimalism, conceptual art, ephemeral art, anti-art and a whole aesthetic of transparency, disappearance and disembodiment. In reality, however, what has occurred is a *materialization* of aesthetics everywhere under an operational form. It is indeed because of this that art has been obliged to minimalize itself, to mime its own disappearance. It has been doing this for a century already, duly obeying all the rules. Like all disappearing forms, art seeks to duplicate itself by means of simulation, but it will nevertheless soon be gone, leaving behind an immense museum of artificial art and abandoning the field completely to advertising.

A dizzying eclecticism of form, a dizzying eclecticism of pleasure – such, already, was the agenda of the baroque. For the baroque, however, the vortex of artifice has a fleshly aspect. Like the practitioners of the baroque, we too are irrepressible creators of images, but secretly we are iconoclasts - not in the sense that we destroy images, but in the sense that we manufacture a profusion of images in which there is nothing to see. Most present-day images - be they video images, paintings, products of the plastic arts, or audiovisual or synthesized images – are literally images in which there is nothing to see. They leave no trace, cast no shadow, and have no consequences. The only feeling one gets from such images is that behind each one there is something that has disappeared. The fascination of a monochromatic picture is the marvellous absence of form – the erasure, though still in the form of art, of all aesthetic syntax. Similarly, the fascination of transsexuality is the erasure – though in the form of spectacle – of sexual difference. These are images that conceal nothing, that reveal nothing – that have a kind of negative intensity. The only

benefit of a Campbell's soup can by Andy Warhol (and it is an immense benefit) is that it releases us from the need to decide between beautiful and ugly, between real and unreal, between transcendence and immanence. Just as Byzantine icons made it possible to stop asking whether God existed – without, for all that, ceasing to believe in him.

This is indeed the miraculous thing. Our images are like icons: they allow us to go on believing in art while eluding the question of its existence. So perhaps we ought to treat all present-day art as a set of rituals, and for ritual use only; perhaps we ought to consider art solely from an anthropological standpoint, without reference to any aesthetic judgement whatsoever. The implication is that we have returned to the cultural stage of primitive societies. (The speculative fetishism of the art market itself partakes of the ritual of art's transparency.)

We find ourselves in the realm either of ultra- or of infra-aesthetics. It is pointless to try to endow our art with an aesthetic consistency or an aesthetic teleology. That would be like looking for the blue of the sky at the level of infrared and ultraviolet rays.

In this sense, therefore, inasmuch as we have access to neither the beautiful nor the ugly, and are incapable of judging, we are condemned to indifference. Beyond this indifference, however, another kind of fascination emerges, a fascination which replaces aesthetic pleasure. For, once liberated from their respective constraints, the beautiful and the ugly, in a sense, multiply: they become more beautiful than beautiful, more ugly than ugly. Thus painting currently cultivates, if not ugliness exactly — which remains an aesthetic value — then the uglier-than-ugly (the 'bad', the 'worse', kitsch), an ugliness raised to the second power because it is liberated from any

relationship with its opposite. Once freed from the 'true' Mondrian, we are at liberty to 'out-Mondrian Mondrian'; freed from the true *naifs*, we can paint in a way that is 'more *naif* than *naif*, and so on. And once freed from reality, we can produce the 'realer than real' – hyperrealism. It was in fact with hyperrealism and pop art that everything began, that everyday life was raised to the ironic power of photographic realism. Today this escalation has caught up every form of art, every style; and all, without discrimination, have entered the transaesthetic world of simulation.

There is a parallel to this escalation in the art market itself. Here too, because an end has been put to any deference to the law of value, to the logic of commodities, everything has become 'more expensive than expensive' – expensive, as it were, squared. Prices are exorbitant – the bidding has gone through the roof. Just as the abandonment of all aesthetic ground rules provokes a kind of brush fire of aesthetic values, so the loss of all reference to the laws of exchange means that the market hurtles into unrestrained speculation.

The frenzy, the folly, the sheer excess are the same. The promotional ignition of art is directly linked to the impossibility of all aesthetic evaluation. In the absence of value judgements, value goes up in flames. And it goes up in a sort of ecstasy.

There are two art markets today. One is still regulated by a hierarchy of values, even if these are already of a speculative kind. The other resembles nothing so much as floating and uncontrollable capital in the financial market: it is pure speculation, movement for movement's sake, with no apparent purpose other than to defy the law of value. This second art market has much in common with poker or potlatch – it is a kind of space opera in the hyperspace of value. Should we be scandalized? No. There is nothing immoral here. Just as present-day art is beyond beautiful and ugly, the market, for its part, is beyond good and evil.