Violence of the Virtual and Integral Reality

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"One should not believe that truth remains truth when you remove its veil" – therefore the truth has no bare existence.

"One should not believe that the real remains real when illusion has been taken away from it" – therefore the real has no objective reality. "We have suppressed the true world (*le monde vrai*) – what kind of world does then remain? The world of appearances? Not at all. While suppressing the true world we have also suppressed the world of appearances."

– Nietzsche

What happens to the world when it is freed from truth and appearances? It becomes the real universe, the universe of integral reality. Not truth, nor appearance but integral reality.

If the world in the past leaned toward transcendence, if it fell on occasion into other rear-worlds (*arrières-mondes*), today it is falling into reality. From one transcendence in the heights to another one, this time in the depths. It is as it were the second fall of man that Heidegger talks about: the fall into banality – this time though, no redemption is possible.

According to Nietzsche, once the true world and the world of appearances are lost, the universe becomes a factual, positive universe, such that it does not even need to be true.

This world is as factual as a *ready-made*. Duchamp's "fountain" is the emblem of our modern hyperreality. It results from the violent counter-transfer of every poetic illusion into pure reality, the object transferred onto oneself, every possible metaphor cut short.

The world has become so real that this reality is only bearable at the expense of perpetual denial. "This is not a world," after "this is not a pipe," Magritte's surrealist denial of evidence itself – this double movement of, on one hand, the absolute and definite evidence of the world and, on the other hand, the radical denial of this evidence – dominates the trajectory of modern art, not only of art but also of all our deeper perceptions, of all our apprehensions of the world. We are not talking here about philosophical morals, we are not saying "the world is not what it should be" or "the world is not what it used to be." The world is the way it is. Once transcendence is gone, things are nothing but what they are and, as they are, they are unbearable. They have lost every illusion and have become immediately and entirely real, shadowless, without commentary. At the same time this unsurpassable reality does not exist anymore. It has no reason to exist for it cannot be exchanged for anything. It has no exchange value.

"Does reality exist? Are we in a real world?" – here is the leitmotif of our current culture. This only expresses the fact that the world is prey to reality and it is only bearable as radical denial. All this is logical: as the world can no longer be justified in another world, it needs to be justified here and now and to find strength in reality while purging itself of any illusion. At the same time, as the very result of this counter-transfer, the denial of reality as such grows.

For reality is no longer prey to its natural predators, it proliferates very much like an algae, or like the human species in general. The real grows like a desert.

"Welcome to the desert of the Real" (*The Matrix*).

Illusion, dreams, passion, madness, drugs but also artifice and *simulacrum* were the natural predators of reality. All these have lost their energy as if they were suffering from some incurable, surreptitious disease (that might very well be reality itself). One needs then to find an artificial equivalent for them. Otherwise, once it has reached a critical mass, reality will spontaneously destroy itself. It will implode by itself – which it is already doing now, making room for the Virtual in all its forms.

The Virtual is the ultimate predator, the plunderer of reality. Reality has generated the Virtual as a kind of viral and self-destructing agent. Reality has become prey to virtual reality. The ultimate consequence of a process that started with the abstraction of objective reality and ends in integral reality.

The Virtual is not about a "rear-world" (*arrière-monde*): The replacement of the world is total, it repeats itself identically, a perfect lure. So the question is resolved by the sheer annihilation of symbolic substance. Even objective reality becomes a useless function, a kind of trash, the exchange and circulation of which has become more and more difficult We have moved past objective reality into something new, a kind of ultra reality that puts an end both to reality and to illusion.

The hypothesis is the following: the world is given to us. The symbolic law says: what is given must be given back. In the past one could give thanks, in one way or another, to God or any other authority, and respond to the gift by sacrifice. From now on there is no one to give thanks to, for transcendence has vanished. If one cannot give back anything in exchange for this world, it is unacceptable. We then need to get rid of the natural world and to substitute an artificial one for it, built from scratch, a world for which we do not have to account to anyone.

Hence this gigantic undertaking of technically eliminating the natural world in all its forms. Anything that is natural will be irrevocably rejected, sooner or later, as a consequence of this symbolic rule of (impossible) exchange. It is the final solution (including extermination).

This does not resolve anything of course. It is impossible to avoid this new debt we have contrac ted to ourselves. How can we be absolved from this technical world and this artificial power? We again need to negate or destroy this world if we cannot give it back, or exchange it for anything (and what would we exchange it for?). That explains, as our building of this artificial universe is moving forward, the huge negative counter-transfer against the integral reality we have created. Deep denial is now present everywhere. What will prevail over it? This irresistible undertaking or this violent abreaction?

Let us now enter this sphere of integral reality (we have yet to determine if this reality has one, or two, or three dimensions).

Here is an example – integral music. It is heard in quadraphonic spaces and it can be "composed" on a computer. A music whose sound has been clarified and purged, a music restored in its technical perfection. The sound there is not the result of a form; it is actualized by a programme. A music reduced to a pure wavelength. The final reception, the

sensorial impact on the listener is also programmed with precision like that in a closed circuit. A virtual music in other words, flawless, deprived of any imagination, mistaken for its own model, the enjoyment of which is also virtual. Is it still music? Nothing is less certain; it was even suggested to reintroduce noise to make it sound more "musical."

The same can be said about synthesized and digital images, images that are pure creations, with no real reference, and from where the negative itself has disappeared – we are not only talking about the negative of the photograph but about the negative moment at the core of the image, an absence that makes the image vibrate. A digital image is technically perfect. There is no room there for *fuzziness*, no tremor either, or any space left for chance. Is it still an image then?

Take now the example of the Integral Man (*Homme Intégral*), the human being, genetically modified and edited for perfection. It is purged of any accident, of any disease, any emotional problem, for genetic manipulation does not aim at reproducing the original human formula but a formula that is the most standardized for efficiency (serial morphing).

The movie *Minority Report* gives us a taste of this. In this movie crime is prevented and punished before it even takes place, before anyone knows whether or not the crime would have taken place. Nipped in the bud, in imagination even, according to the now universal principle of precaution.

The movie is naive and anachronistic, however, because it still involves repression. In the future, prevention will be genetic, *intragenic*. The "criminal gene" will undergo prophylactic sterilization at birth or even before birth (this will need to be systematized, of course, because in the opinion of the police or of the powers that be, we all are potential criminals).

This manipulation is a fine illustration of what will happen to the future human being. It will be modified and corrected. Straightaway, it will be what it should be ideally; it will never become *what it is*. It will not even be alienated anymore, by virtue of its pre-existential modification for better or for worse. It will not even have to face its otherness as it will have straightaway been suppressed by its model. All this relies on a universal process of identification of Evil that, of course, aims at eradicating. While it used to be metaphysical or moral, Evil now is materialized, embodied in the genes (it can just as well be turned into the Axis of Evil). It becomes an objective reality, objectively dispensable. We will manage to eradicate it completely, and with it everything that made dreams, utopia, illusion, fantasy – all of this, according to the same global process, is being taken away from the possible, to be poured back into the real.

The same goes for everything that has to do with virtual reality and synthesized models. Digital and programmed, the real does not even have time to happen. It is sanitized (*prophylactisé*), pulverized, short-circuited in its shell like the crime in *Minority Report*. Thinking itself is anticipated by models of artificial intelligence. Time itself, the time already lived out that has no more time to take place, is captured and spirited away by virtual time, which we choose, mockingly no doubt, to call "real time." The historical time of the event, the psychological time of affect and passion, the subjective time of judgment and will, all are being questioned simultaneously. We will not even *give time to time*.

Last but not least: by some strange surgical operation, language, in its digital version, has been purged of its symbolism, of everything that allows language to be more than what it means. Any absence, any vacuum, any literalness in it – anything that prevents its meaning

from being brought into focus – has been eliminated like the negative in a synthesized image. Such is the integral reality of language.

It is also the death of the sign. Integral language does not contain any signs – the sign and its representation have disappeared. Now it is precisely when the sign and the real are no longer exchangeable that reality, now left alone and meaningless, veers off exponentially and proliferates infinitely. The death of the sign paves the way to integral reality.

We often hear that the real has disappeared because of the hegemony of the sign, the images and the *simulacrum*, that reality has been erased by the artifice. This analysis underlies the concept of the Société du Spectacle. We need to reverse this overly common analysis and say: We have lost both the sign and the artifice for the benefit of the absolute real. We have lost everything: the spectacle, alienation, distancing, transcendence, abstraction – everything that was defending us from the onset of integral reality, of the immediate realization of a world with no reprieve.

With the disappearance of the *simulacrum* as such, a later stage in the process of simulation has been reached, namely the simulation of a real more real than the real, the simulation of a hyperreal.

What does then make the exchange impossible if not the abstract transcendence of the value? What makes the exchange of language possible if not the abstract transcendence of the sign? All this is now liquidated, pulverized. The value as well as the sign is affected by the same dizziness of deregulation. It is not the real but the sign and, with it, all the universe of meaning and communication, that is subjected to the same deregulation that affects the markets (maybe this came even before the deregulation of the world market).

The caves of Lascaux offer an almost trivial example of this confusion. The original caves having been closed for a long time, visitors line up in front of a replica, a *simulacrum* of the caves, Lascaux II. Most visitors do not even know that what they are seeing is a replica as there is nowhere any indication of the existence of the original caves. What awaits us is a kind of prefiguration of the world: the replica is so perfect that we will no longer know that it is a replica. Now, what happens to the original when the replica stops being a replica? Such is the ironical dialectics of the *simulacrum* at a later stage of disappearance. Even the original is equal to the artifice. There is definitely no more God who can recognize His own (from that point of view, one may at least say that God is indeed dead). Here we have a kind of justice, the privileged and the underprivileged ones are now equal in an artificial world. As soon as the original becomes an allegory among others in a technically completed world, democracy is then realized.

As well, what becomes of the arbitrariness of the sign when the referent stops being the referent? Without the arbitrariness of the sign, there is no differential function, no language and no symbolic dimension. As it stops being sign, the sign becomes a thing (*chose*) among other things. It becomes something of a total necessity or of an absolute contingency. Without the *instanciation* of the meaning by the sign, only the fanaticism of language remains – this fanaticism that Ferlusio defines as an "absolutist inflammation of the signifier."

My hypothesis is that a kind of radical fetishism, resulting from the eclipse of every process of meaning, underlies the transformation of the real into pure information and the cloning of the real by virtual reality.

What hides behind the immateriality of the technologies of the virtual, of the digital and of the screen, is indeed an injunction, an imperative that McLuhan had already spotted in the television and media image: an imperative of reinforced participation, an interactive investment that may turn into fascination, into the "ecstatic" implication that we see everywhere in the cyberworld.

Immersion, immanence, and immediacy characterize the virtual. No more gaze, no more stage, no more imaginary, no more illusion even, no more exteriority, no more spectacle: the operational fetish has absorbed all exteriority, all interiority and even time in the operation of "real time." It is the realization of utopia.

We are this way getting closer to the real world, a world "integrally" realized, affected and identified as such. We are talking about the real world not about the *world-as-is*, which is totally different The world-as-is is in the nature of appearances (or even of integral illusion because there is no possible representation of it) or as Nietzsche says "while suppressing the true world we have also suppressed the world of appearances."

Video, interactive screens, multimedia, the Internet, virtual reality – we are threatened on all sides by interactivity. What used to be separated is now merged; distance is everywhere abolished: between the sexes, between opposite poles, between stage and audience, between the protagonists of action, between subject and object, between the real and it's double. This confusion of terms, this collision of poles means that there is no more possibility of a moral judgment, neither in art nor in morality nor in politics. With the abolition of distance and of the "pathos" of distance, everything becomes undecidable, even in the physical realm: when the receiver and the source of transmission are too close together, a feedback effect known as the Larsen effect occurs which muddles up the transmission waves; when an event and the broadcasting of that event in real time are too close together, the event becomes undecidable, virtual, stripped of its historical dimension and removed from memory. We are in a kind of generalized Larsen effect.

Wherever distance is abolished, wherever a collision of poles occurs, we get a Larsen effect.

Even in reality TV, where, in the live telling of the story, in the immediate televised acting, we witness the confusion of the existence and its double. No more distance, no more vacuum and no more absence: one enters the screen and the visual image without encountering any obstacle. One enters one's life while walking onto a screen. One puts on one's own life like a digital suit.

Unlike photography, cinema, and painting, where there is a scene and a gaze, the video image and the computer screen induce a kind of immersion, a kind of umbilical connection and of "tactile" interaction, as McLuhan said of television. A cellular, corpuscular immersion: one enters the fluid substance of the image in order to possibly modify it, in the same way as science infiltrates itself into the genome, the genetic code, to transform the body itself. One moves as one likes, one makes of the interactive image what one wishes to. Immersion is the price to pay for this infinite availability, for this open combinatory of elements. The same goes for any "virtual" text (the Internet, word processors): it is worked on like a computer-generated image; it has nothing to do anymore with the transcendence of the gaze or of writing. In any case, once in front of the screen, one no longer sees the text as text, but as image. It is only in the strict separation of text and screen, of text and image, that writing is an activity in its own right – never an interaction.

As well, only the strict separation of stage and audience will allow the spectator to be a participant in one's own right. Everything today contributes to abolishing that separation. The spectator is immersed in a user-friendly, interactive spectacle. Is it the *apogée* of the spectacle or is it the end of it? When all become actors, there is no action, no scene anymore. It is the end of the aesthetic illusion.

Another form of implosion is the feedback. Integral reality refers to everything that works in an integrated circuit. When everything that happens gets immediate feedback. May '68 and the radios on the barricades. One no longer does anything unless one sees oneself do it. Even irony is part of the mechanism. Immediate promiscuity of the control screen, even in our head.

Once again it is not a representation but a rotating movement of things that are jumbled together, joined, saturated.

It is a perfect reality, in the sense that it is realized right through (*perfectum*). In a perfect reality nothing is "verified" unless it is "pasted" on and mistaken for its own image. Feedback best illustrates this process. It affects the visual and mediatic universe as well as the political and intellectual life, the daily and individual life, our movements, our thinking. This automatic refraction of our thoughts affects us deeply in our own perception of the simplest and most natural world. Feedback seals everything by focusing on it, by automatically simulating it. In a way, feedback is the virus of our postmodernity.

Feedback short-circuits the gaze; it short-circuits the representation by, so to speak, duplicating things beforehand and by interfering with their progress. Feedback covers everything with a "performance veil" – a particularly sensitive phenomenon in the photographic universe where beings and things immediately "put on" a context, a culture, a meaning, an idea of themselves while blocking off every vision and creating a sort of blindness that Raphaël Sanchez Ferlosio denounces:

There is a terrible form of blindness that very few notice. It allows you to look at and to see but not to see at once without looking at. It is the way things used to be: one would not look at them, one would just see them. Today everything is caught in duplicity; there is no pure and direct impulse. This is how the countryside has become "landscape," that is to say a representation of itself....

In this way one may say that our perception itself, our immediate sensitivity have become aesthetic. All our senses – sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste – have become aesthetic in the worse meaning of the word. Therefore any new vision can only result from a deconstruction of this feedback, from a resolution of this counter-transfer that blocks off any vision.

One needs to distinguish the process of confusion with one's own image from the process of representation where we differ from each other by our opposite image and enter an open form of alienation, an open form of play with the image. It is precisely the mirror, the image, the gaze and the scene that were opening onto a culture of the metaphor.

Machines produce only machines. This is increasingly true as the virtual technologies are becoming more perfect. At a certain level of machine-ness, of immersion in virtual machinery, there is no more distinction between man and machine. The machine is on both sides of the interface. You may indeed be merely the space of the machine now: man has become the virtual reality of the machine, its mirror operator. This has to do with the very essence of the screen. One cannot look "through" the screen as if it were a looking-glass.

The dimensions of time itself merge there in "real time." The characteristic of any virtual surface is first of all to be there, empty and thus likely to be filled with anything. It is left to you to interact in real time with the vacuum.

Machines produce only machines. The texts, images, films, speeches, and programmes that come out of computers are machine products. They have the features of machine products: they are artificially expanded, facelifted by the machine; the movies are full of special effects, the texts full of lengthy passages and repetitions, which are the consequences of the malicious will of the machine to function at all costs (for that is its passion), and of the operator's fascination with the limitless opportunity of operating the machine. Hence the wearisome character of all this violence and "pornographied" sexuality, which are merely special effects of violence and sex that are no longer even fantasized by humans. This pure mechanic violence does not affect us any longer. Hence all these texts which can be regarded as the works of "intelligent" virtual agents, whose only act is the act of programming. The rest unfolds in a purely automatic fashion. This has nothing to do with automatic writing (*écriture automatique*), which played on the magical telescoping of words and concepts, whereas all we are left with here is the automatic programming of all the possibilities. Forward, the machine design of the body, the *make-up* of the text and the image. This is called cybernetics: controlling the image, the text, the body from within, as it were, by playing with its genetic code or modalities. It is this phantasm of the ideal performance of the text or image, the possibility of correcting endlessly, which triggers in the operator this dizziness of interactivity with his/her own object and, at the same time, the anxious dizziness of not having reached the technological limits of his/her possibilities. In fact, the virtual machine is speaking you, it is thinking you.

Is there, by the way, any possibility of discovering something in cyberspace? The Internet merely simulates a mental space of freedom and discovery. Indeed it merely offers an enhanced, yet conventional, space, in which the operator interacts with known elements, pre-existent sites and established codes. Nothing exists beyond these search parameters. Every question has its anticipated response. You are the automatic questioning-and-answering device of the machine. Both coder and decoder, you are, in fact, your own terminal. That is the ecstasy of communication.

No more "other" facing you. No more final destination. Any destination, any correspondent will do. The system goes on, without end and without purpose with the sole potential for infinite reproduction and involution. Hence the comfortable dizziness produced by this electronic interaction that acts like drugs. One can spend one's entire life at this, without any interruption. Drugs themselves are only the perfect example of a crazed, closed-circuit interactivity.

In order to win you over to it, people tell you that the computer is merely a handier and more complex kind of typewriter. But this is not true. The typewriter is an entirely external object. The page flutters in the open air, and so do I. I have a physical relation to writing. I touch the blank or written page with my eyes, which is something I cannot do with the screen. As for the computer, it is a true prosthesis. I am in a tactile and intersensory relation with it. I am becoming myself an ectoplasm of the screen. Hence, in this incubation of the virtual image and of the brain, the technical faults which afflict computers and which are like the *lapsus* of one's own body.

On the other hand, the fact that priority is given to the identity of the network and never to the individuals' identity implies the option of hiding and disappearing into the intangible space of the virtual and thus, the option of not being located anywhere, which resolves all

problems of identity, not to mention those of otherness. The attraction of all these virtual machines undoubtedly derives not so much from the thirst for information and knowledge as from the possibility to dissolve oneself into a phantom conviviality. A feeling of "being high" takes the place of happiness. Virtuality comes close to happiness only because it surreptitiously removes every reference from it. It gives you everything, but, at the same time, it subtly takes everything away from you. The subject is realized to perfection, but then, it automatically becomes object and panic sets in.

It is against this world that has become entirely operational that the denial and disavowal of reality develop. If the world is to be taken as a whole, it must be rejected as a whole, the way the body rejects a foreign element. There is no other solution. Thanks to a form of instinct, of vital reaction we are able to rise up against this immersion in a perfected world, in the "Kingdom of Heaven" where real life is sacrificed to the hyper realization of all these possibilities, to its maximal performance, the same way the human species is sacrificed to its genetic perfection. Our negative abreaction results from our hypersensitivity to the ideal life conditions that are offered to us.

This perfect reality, to which we are sacrificing every illusion, is, of course, a phantom reality. It belongs to another world. If both reality and truth were to be subject to a lie detector, they would confess that they do not believe in this perfect reality. Reality has vanished, and yet we are suffering as if it still existed. We are like Ahab in *Moby-Dick*: "If I feel the pain in my leg, although it no longer exists, who can assure me that you will not suffer from the torments of hell even after your death?"

There is nothing metaphorical in this sacrifice. It is more of a surgical operation, which provides oneself some kind of self-enjoyment: "Humanity that, long ago, with Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become its own object of contemplation. Its alienation from oneself is such that it is now experiencing its own destruction as a first-rate aesthetic sensation" (Benjamin). Self-destruction is indeed one of all the options offered to us. It is an exceptional option for it poses a challenge to all the other ones.

Focusing on a perfectly integrated reality is bound to entail many forms of exclusion, of eccentric or parallel worlds – not only marginal or peripheral ones as they exist in traditional societies, but worlds that find themselves clearly dissociated at the very core of this total integration.

The homogeneity and the very coherence of life are, for that matter, turning us off. What applies to the real applies to the social: one day everything will be social, everything will be real but we will not be there anymore. We will be elsewhere. Everything will be social and dissociated. Double lives, parallel worlds will be our both negative and happy fate. We will be freed from the grip of the real.

Are all the functions – the body, the real, sex, death – not destined to live on as parallel worlds, as autonomous peculiarities, completely dissociated from the dominant world?

Finally, what is fundamental is the stranger-ness (étrangeté) of the world, the one which resists the status of objective reality. The world itself resists globalization. As well, what is fundamental is our own stranger-ness, the one which resists the status of subject. Double illusion: the illusion of an objective reality of the world and the illusion of a subjective reality of a subject. They are reflected in the same mirror and are one and the same founding movement of our metaphysics.

As for the world-as-is, it is not at all objective. It rather looks like a strange *attracteur*. Since the world and the appearances are dangerously attractive, we prefer to exchange it for its operational *simulacrum*, its artificial truth and its automatic writing. This is yet a bit risky because everything with which we defend ourselves against vital illusion – this entire strategy of defence by the principle of reality – acts as a true emotional shield and becomes unbearable to us.

In all those forms of disavowal, denial, *dénégation* (in the sense of the German *Verleugnung*, not *Verneinung*), we are no longer confronted with a dialectics of negativity or with the work of the negative. This move no longer concerns notions of ultimate purpose, or of contradiction, as in simple negative critique; it has to do with reality as such, its principle and its hard evidentiality. The larger the space taken by positivity, the more likely it is that denial – possibly even silent – will turn violent. We are all dissenters of reality today, clandestine dissenters most of the time. When there is no possibility of exchange between thought and reality, immediate denial becomes the only way to think reality.

Negativity used to correspond to plain positivity, or critical reality, that had not yet crossed over to the other side of the mirror. When positivity turns out to be absolute, denial becomes radical. Every option of dialectical negativity has been absorbed and liquidated. The limiting case of that ultimate reaction to the fundamentalism of reality is absolute denial (i.e. *négationnisme*, as we speak of "denying" the Holocaust). Think about it: it is the virtual itself that is *négationniste*. It is the virtual that takes away the substance of the real, setting it off balance. We are living in a society of *négationnisme* by virtue of its virtuality. Disbelief reigns everywhere. No event is perceived as "real" anymore. Criminal attempts, trials, wars, corruption, opinion polls: all of that is either falsified or undecidable. State power and its institutions are the first victims of the disgrace of the principle of reality. Hence the moral urgency, in the face of rampant *négationnisme*, of recovering the "citizen's viewpoint," taking one's stand *for* reality, against the frailty of all information. The mirror of information has been broken. The mirror of historical time has been broken. This is why it has become possible to negate the existence of the Shoah, together with the rest (the Pentagon crash, man landing on the moon). The reign of the virtual is also the reign of the principle of uncertainty. It is the inevitable counterpart of a reality turned unreal by excess of positivity.

Will this last forever? Are we doomed to remain captives of this transfer of the real into total positivity, and of its no less ponderous counter-transfer shift toward pure and simple negativity?

Against total absorption, against extinction of the sign and its representation, we have said it was imperative to save difference, all differences. In particular, to save the distinction between the world-as-is and the real world. Whereas everything pushes us toward the virtual realization of the world, we need instead to wrench the real out of its reality principle. In fact, it is this very confusion that prevents us from seeing the world-as-is. In the words of Italo Svevo: "the search for causes is an immense misunderstanding, a clinging superstition, preventing things and events from coming into being as they are". Namely: in their singularity. The real world belongs to the order of generality, the world-as-is to singularity. To repeat: not only is it a world of difference, it is one of absolute, radical difference, more different than difference, at the remotest distance from that sort of fusion /confusion.

Toward literalness.

Consider the literalness of the image.

The image is not related to the truth. It is related to appearances. Hence its magical affiliation with the illusion of the world-as-is – an affiliation which reminds us that, whatever its content, the real (like the worst) is never a certainty and that, perhaps the world may do without the real and the principle of reality.

I believe that images affect us immediately, well ahead of, at an infra-level to representation, at the level of intuition, of perception. In that sense, an image is always absolutely surprising. Or at least it should be so. Sadly, because of that, we can say that images are scarce. The force of images, most of the time, is cut off, deflected, intercepted by everything we want them to say for us.

So you can see there is a blur in the real. Reality is not focused. The world-as-is cannot be brought into focus (which makes it very different from the real world). Bringing the world into focus would refer to objective reality, so-called reality on the side of the objects, that is to say bringing it into focus on models of representation – as it happens when we bring the lens of the camera into focus on the object, aiming for absolute precision of the image. Fortunately, this definitive level of precision is never achieved. Full control through verification and identification of the world cannot be achieved. The lens displaces the object. Or the other way around. In any case, there is displacement.

There is an aphorism by Lichtenberg that speaks of "tremor." Indeed, all gestures, including the most assured, begin with a tremor, like a fuzziness of motion. And there is always a trace of it left behind. Without that tremor, that fuzziness, when a gesture is purely procedural, when it is brought into perfect focus, we have something of the order of madness. So, genuine images are those which attest that tremor of the world, whatever the situation or the object: pictures of war, still-life compositions, landscape, portrait, art, and documentary.

At this point, the image is something that belongs to the world, it is a part of its becoming, it participates in the metamorphosis of appearances. The image is a fragment of the hologram of the world. Every detail of it is a refraction of the whole. A nice metaphor for this is found in the movie entitled *L'étudiant de Prague*. After selling his image to the Devil, he breaks up the mirror of representation (that is his lost image). Only then does he find his genuine image, in the shards of the mirror – and he dies.

The purpose of a photograph is not to document the event. It aspires to be the event itself. Logic will claim that, first, there is the event, first comes the real, then only will the image appear, to document it. Sadly, this is what happens most of the time. A more poetic sequence intends that the event has never taken place in an absolute sense, that it remains in some way a stranger to itself. Something of this strangerness survives in every event, in every object, probably in every individual. This is what the image must account for, or "develop" so to speak, and for this to be developed, the image itself must remain, in some way, a stranger to itself. It ought not to reflect itself as medium; it must not take itself for an image. It ought to remain a fiction, an echo of the irresolvable fiction of the event. The image must not be caught in its own trap; nor should it let itself be trapped by the feedback loop. The worst part for us today is the impossibility of seeing a world without feedback – so as not to have it recaptured, raptured, filmed, photographed, before we can even see it. That is lethal not only for the "real" world, but for the image itself, since, if everything is an image, the image is nowhere, at least as an exception, an illusion, a parallel universe. In the visual flow of events in which we find ourselves submerged, the image itself does not even have the time to become an image.

Can photography be an exception in the face of that outpouring of images, can it restore them to their initial power? To do so, the clatter of the world must be suspended; the object must be grasped at the only moment of true magic, the first contact, when things have not yet sensed our presence, when absence and vacuum have not yet evaporated …. In fact, it is necessary for the world itself to act out the role of the photographer – as if it had the possibility to appear to us outside ourselves.

I dream of an image that would be the automatic writing of the singularity of the world – after the Iconoclastic dream of Byzantium. The Iconoclasts held that the only genuine images were those in which the divine figure was immediately present – as in the veil of the Holy Face – an automatic writing of the singularity of the divinity, of the face of Christ, without any interference from the human hand. I have a dream of an immediate calque, like the reverse image of the negative in photography. The Iconoclasts rejected violently all other images, human-made icons that, according to them, were mere *simulacra* of the divine, *acheiropoiesis* (etymologically: *not* fabricated by a human hand).

Similarly, we, modern iconoclasts, might reject all those images that are mere *simulacra* resembling the real, or an idea, an ideology, whichever truth. Most images are of that type, but virtual images even more so. They resemble nothing.

This is exactly it. What is *cheiropoietic*? What is *acheiropoietic*?

Isn't the *act* of photography in this sense properly *acheiropoietic*? Automatic writing by virtue of light, without interference from the real or the idea of the real? Such automaticity would make photography the prototype of the literalness of a world from which the human hand has disappeared. The world as self-generator, radical illusion, pure trace, with no simulation, no human interference, above all without truth. If there is a product *par excellence* of the human mind, a *cheiropoietic* product, it has got to be the truth, objective reality.

Have we not had, ever since the beginning, the profound fantasy of a world functioning without us? The poetic temptation to see the world in our absence, exempt of all human intervention, the all too human willpower? What is so immensely pleasurable in poetic language, in *le mot d'esprit*, is to see language operate by itself, in its materiality, its literalness, without being mindful of meaning. This is what fascinates us so much. The same thing goes for anagrams, anamorphosis, the "figure hidden in the carpet." Does not photography also operate as a means of revelation in both senses of the word in French – it develops, technically; and it reveals, metaphysically – "the figure in the carpet"? Italo Calvino wrote: "The lesson of a myth is in the literalness of its narrative. Every interpretation impoverishes the myth and strangles it. Better to meditate on each detail patiently, never abandoning its figurative language."

Even dreams, in their psychoanalytic versions, lose their literal character. They fall prey to meaning and interpretation. Dreams, however, like myths, are cunning. They contest, like language in general, what we want them to signify. There is a cunning of literalness that goes against analytic exegesis and that resuscitates ever so subtly (is this not the secret of literacy?) the world-as-is, a world which is, literally speaking, only what it is.

These are the stakes nowadays. We are being faced with a new fundamentalism, a genuine fanaticism that, with the help of all the data provided by all the technologies, is taking us further and further from the literal and material world, further and further from a truly literal world, off toward a world technically "real."

Jean Baudrillard
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Jean Baudrillard, Professor at the University of Paris, is a famous social philosopher. He is a leading critic of postmodern culture, the economy of communication, and the media system. He is the author of *System of Objects, The Consumer Society, For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, The Mirror of Production, Symbolic Exchange and Death, On Seduction, Simulacra and Simulation*, and *Fatal Strategies*.