Eclipse of the Spectacle

JONATHAN CRARY

The pervasive imagery now enveloping us—a rationalized world of digitized life and languages mediated by video display screens—is in part prefigured in Nikola Tesla's 1901 plan for a World System of totally interconnected, planetary communications. Although bound up with other fin de siecle dreams of simultaneity, Tesla's ideas had more of an affinity with the needs of state and corporate power than other modes of modernism. He believed he could engineer a globe unified by the universal registration of time and fully traversed by flows of language, images, and money—all reduced to an undifferentiated flux of electrical energy. Backed by J. P. Morgan, Tesla's first transmission station rose on the North Shore of Long Island; two hundred feet high, the Wardenclyffe Tower stood only from 1901 to 1903, never capped by the immense copper dome Tesla planned for it. No piece of sculpture better embodied the synchronous, history-rending aspirations of modernism than this tower. It would well be poised alongside Tatlin's Monument to the Third International and Brancusi's Endless Column to represent the three variants of modernist absolutism: corporate, historicist, and aestheticist.

Although Tesla's vision was to prove the most durable of these three, its full realization was postponed for over eight decades. A major oil discovery at Spindletop, Texas, also in 1902, helped assure the continued dominance of the extensive, vehicular space traversed by the railroads and then the automobile well into the twentieth century. Nonetheless, Tesla's achievement was to transform Edison's relatively pedestrian notion of electricity as a commodity to be sold in units to consumers into an apprehension of electricity as an immaterial substance into which anything was transmisible and which could instantaneously intervene anywhere, even to literally occupy the full body of the earth and atmosphere.1

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cation of alternate actuality. And, at the cold, superlative core of this antinomy is not absolute knowledge, but rather the absolute domination of digitized memory-storage banks, not even thinly fashionable through the spurious screens of video display terminals. Philip K. Dick, in his novel *A Scanner Darkly*, touched on what is also crucial in Baudrillard's work: "Biological life goes on; everything else is dead. A reflex machine. Like some insect. Repeating died patterns over and over. A single pattern." 8

For Baudrillard, television is a paradigm of implosive effects: it collapses any distinction between receiver or sender or between the medium and the real. Like Mallarme's Herodias caught in a sterile closed circuit with her mirror, Baudrillard's subject is locked into an "imperfect interface" with the video screen in a universe of "virtualization." Television, for Baudrillard, exists as a purely abstract and inanimate function, from which any principle of disorder is excluded. The materiality of both viewer and television apparatus dissolves, along with any multiple or contradictory layers of institutional texture. His perfect circuit of viewer-TV-the subjects on a single, formalized plane solely as an index of the nonworking of power and of the illusory essence of all significations.

Implosion announces the collapse of capital's ability to expand: it is an unprecedented social contraction and paralysis, the last unmasking of a long sequence of representational illusions in operation since the Renaissance. But perhaps it is not even a question of "the end of capitalism" or of "late capitalism." Deleuze and Guattari, for example, propose that capitalism is by its very nature always "neo-capitalism." 9 While Baudrillard sees technological miniaturization as a symptom of implosion, Deleuze and Guattari read it as part of the reorganization of a global system of domination and circulation. 10 Following from their model, geographical frontiers no longer exist and in their place are being manufactured vast microelectronic territories for expansion. Telecommunications is no longer and is in part to what railroads were for capitalism in the nineteenth century. And it is this electronic substitute for geography that corporate and national entities are now carving up. Information, structured by automated data processing, becomes a new kind of raw material—one that is not depleted by use. 11 Patterns of accumulation and consumption now shift onto new surfaces. Against this scenario, implosion, in all its solemnity, seems like the death wish of a failed humanism, in which capitalism and mass culture are guilty—above all else—of the "liquidation of tragedy." 12

However, Baudrillard is not wrong to proclaim the end of what Guy Debord called "the society of the spectacle." Clearly, a certain period in the initial deployment of television is over, a phase roughly coinciding with post-World War II U.S. hegemony. It is in the mid-1970s that the transformation of television and its insertion into a wholly different set of structures began, alongside the reorganization of world markets on a non-lapolar model. The convergence of home computer, television, and telephone lines as the nexus of a new social machinery testifies to an undoing of the spectator consumption of the commodity. And paradoxically, television, which had elevated the commodity to the height of a socialist space, is now implicated in the collapse of that space and the consequent evaporation of aura around the body of the commodity.

For Debord, writing in 1967, at the last high tide of the "Pax Americana," the auraic presence of the commodity was bound up with the illusion of its utter tangibility. 13 But since that time, we have witnessed the gradual displacement of aura from images of possessable objects to digitized flows of data, to the glow of the VDT and the promise of access embodied there. It is a reversal of the process indicated by Debord, in which the seeming self-sufficiency of the commodity was a "blockadement" of forces that were essentially mobile and dynamic. Now, however, with pure flux itself a commodity, a spectacular and "contemplative" relation to objects is undermined and supplanted by new kinds of investments. There is no more opposition between the abstraction of money and the apparent materiality of commodities, money and what it can buy are now fundamentally of the same substance. And it is the potential dissolution of any language of the market or of desire into binarized pulses of light or electricity that unifies the fictive unity of spectacular representation. Figurative images lose their transparency and are consumed as simply one more code.

Consider General Hospital, allegedly the most widely watched afternoon soap opera. It is consumed essentially as strings of representations that never surpass their functioning as an abstract code. In its construction and effects, General Hospital announces the disappearance of the visual and narrative space that might seem to have authorized it and points toward a fully pro-

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grammable calculus of continually switching syntheses of figural and narrative units. The consonant repetition of "formulas" is no longer even a possibility. In General Hospital any character, relationship, identity, or situation is reversible, exchangeable, convertible into its opposite. With the eradication of any simulation of interiority, one invests not into images of actors but onto the formal management of these images. Discontinuities, substitutions, and duplications shatter the illusion which once would have been called bourgeois verisimilitude. More and more the so-called "content" of television shifts in this direction: it is not at all a question of the replication of life, but of its reduction to abstract and manipulable elements ready to be harmonized with a plethora of other electronic flows. Television was not destined finally for analog tasks, but when it first appeared how could the networks in which it is now positioned have been foreseen? It seemed then, according to what McLuhan calls "rear view motorism," like one more refinement in five centuries of space-simulating techniques. Yet as reproductive technology attains new parameters of mimetic "fidelity" (holography, high-resolution TV) there is an inverse move of the image toward pure surface, so that whatever drifts across the screen of either television or home computer is part of the same homogeneity.\footnote{15}

Up through the 1960s television collaborated with the automobile in sustaining the dominant machinery of capitalist representation: in the virtual annexation of all spaces and the liquidation of any unified signs that had occupied them. The TV screen and car windshield reconciled visual experience with the velocities and discontinuities of the marketplace.\footnote{16} As windows they seemed to open onto a visual pyramid of extensive space in which autonomous movement might be possible; instead, both were apertures that framed the subject's transit through streams of disjoint objects and affects, across disintegrating and hyperabundant surfaces. These latter are the trajectories that run through Strath and Halley's History Lessons and so many of Godard's films.

Although both car and TV were primary disciplinary instruments for the production of normalized subjects, the subject they produced also had to be competent to consume and co-exist with a tremendous field of free-floating signs that has previously been grounded. Privatization and control on one hand and deterritorialization on the other were engineered by the same machines. But the channeling of the highway (e.g., the conclusion of Godard's Made in U.S.A.) and the sequentia of TV images masked the actual disorganization and nonuniformity of these networks. The vortex of overlapping

\footnote{15} Video art, paradoxically, depends for its intelligibility on its isolation from television. It can exist only in the cliques of gallery-museum space or wherever the video monitor claims autonomy and independence from major networks of distribution. As a case in point was the fair of Nam June Paik's Good Morning Mr. Orwell, broadcast January 1, 1984, on network TV. Its insertion into that system rendered it invisible, unlocatable by the adjacent texture of flow. Yet, as if to preserve its identity and visibility, a "live" viewing was organized as the art gallery space of The Kitchen in New York.

\footnote{16} Virtue attaches to the affinity of windshield and TV screen in "La troisième facette." See also his discussion of the automobile as an instrument of mass mobilization in "Vitesse et Politique" (Paris: Galilée, 1977). pp. 33-37.
to explore. What his texts exclude is any sense of breakdown, of faulty circuits, of systemic malfunction; or of a body that cannot be fully colonized or parceled, of electron, and of the colossal dilapidation of everything that claims infallibility or sleekness. This is the particular importance of the novels of Philip Dick and the films of David Cronenberg; they describe a world no less congested with the technology of everyday life than Baudrillard’s, but they insist on a threshold at which the social domestication of the body produces unmanageable disruption, as in psychosis or contagion. For both, television and the sovereignty of the hyperreal are so effective in building a fully delusional world that the mechanisms of social rationalization rapidly collapse, including even Baudrillard’s “circularity of media effects.”

Another work signaling a limit to the hyperreality of spectacular space is J. G. Ballard’s The Atrocity Exhibition (1969).18 In this exemplary dystopian text Ballard details the collapse of a landscape through which line of demarcation and specialization have proceeded to absolute tolerances. Ballard explores fractured zones in which sheer contiguity replaces syntax and which extend only in terms of the ceaseless compounding of bodies, architecture, and images that briefly abut, then detach to make new connections. The Atrocity Exhibition coincides with a dissolution of legibility generated by the very efficacy and supremacy of the spectacle. Ballard’s landscape, the city interpenetrated by images/events of car crashes, assassinations, celebrities, astronauts, and war crimes, demands an unmitigating effort of decipherment, an effort rendered impossible, however, by the equivalence of everything glutting the field. A fully saturated spectacular space neutralizes the interpretive delirium of paranoia at the very moment of inciting it. And for Ballard the events of the 1960s, those which authenticated the spectacle and guaranteed its transparency (Kennedy assassination, moon landing, Vietnam War, Zapruder frames, etc.) become part of an opaque text that cannot be read and no longer claims significance.

For Ballard, the crisis of the spectacle in the late 1960s follows from the disengagement of desire, its denial floating-free from anchoring structures. His space exploits the possibility of cathexis with anything because every surface is available for investment. “Sex is now a conceptual act,” says the omnipresent Dr. Nathan. “The perversions are completely neutral—in fact, most of the ones I’ve tried are out of date. We need to invent a series of imaginary perversions just to keep the activity alive.” And it was the schizo interregnum of those years that compelled the consolidation of new networks in which to discipline potentially dangerous flows and to reimpose them productively. The late 1960s, whether in China or the West, witnessed a situation requiring more efficient management and the imposition of new regulatory grids: in China it necessitated reorientation of the forces unleashed by the Cultural Revolution; in the West it demanded a rationalization of the spectacle.

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The story running through *The Atrocity Exhalation* are like Foucault’s description of Borges’ *Chinese Encyclopedia*: they testify to the absence of any “homogeneous and neutral space in which things could be placed so as to display at the same time the continuous order of their identities or differences as well as the semantic field of their denomination.”

The violence of Ballard’s text occurs in this kind of absence. Founded on the heterotopia of television, it presents a space in which relations of proximity and of resemblance are hopelessly convoluted onto a single plane. For Ballard empirical and quantitative practices become the split face of psychosis and its loss of identities. The simulation of coherence for him results only from the blank accumulations of clinical data, laboratory recording techniques, and the “objective” observations of scientific research. And as we now know, the computer was to be central to the remaking of the spectacle by offering the semblance of a “homogeneous and neutral” table on which one could know and manipulate the contents of the world without reference to the viable.

When Ballard writes, “The obsession with the specific activity of quantified functions is what science shares with pornography,” he anticipates features of *Gravity’s Rainbow*; but Pynchon’s work is also important here for its exhaustive disclosure of the processes and lines of force which remake the world after World War II, producing the very landscape of *The Atrocity Exhalation*. When Pynchon particularizes the chemical and armaments industries and the German film industry, they stand for a much wider range of technologies and institutions which sought to render any subject or substance controllable, manipulable, and exchangeable, whether it was languages, raw materials, or neural reflexes. “How alphabetic is the nature of molecules. These are our letters, our words: they too can be modulated, broken, recoupled, redefined, co-polymerized one to the other in world wide chains that will surface now and then over long molecular silences like the seen part of a tapestry.”

For Deluze and Guattari, this is a shift from a linguistics of the signifier to a semiotics of flow. It is a transition coinciding with the processes of rationalization that Pynchon describes, the abstract coding of anything that would claim singularity, and also with television’s assimilation of the “semantic field” it Ballard. *Gravity’s Rainbow* tells us better than any other text how World War II was above all an operation of modernization: how it was the necessary crucible for the obliteration of outdated territories, languages, illusions, of any boundaries or forms that impeded the installation of cybernetics as the model for the remaking of the world as pure instrumentality. And it cannot be overstressed how the development of cybernetics (“a theory of messages and their control”) is intertwined with the commodification of all information and with the hegemony of what Pynchon calls the “meta-cartel.”

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22. Ibid., pp. 249 and 566.
that whatever compels speech is intrinsically fascist.25 Most often advocacy of "alternative" uses of telecommunications and computers goes hand in hand with a naïve belief in the neutrality of digital languages and a blindness to the immanence of binary notation within a specific system of technocratic domination.26 The imperatives of that system were disclosed by Herman Kahn in identifying the key vocation of the future: "the extraction of the maximum information from whatever data is on hand."27

Perhaps the most fragile component of this future, however, lies in the immediate vicinity of the terminal screen. We must recognize the fundamental incapacity of capitalism ever to rationalize the circuit between body and computer keyboard, and realize that this circuit is the site of a latent but potentially volatile disequilibrium. The disciplinary apparatus of digital culture poses as a self-sufficient, self-enclosed structure without avenues of escape, with no outside. Its myths of necessity, ubiquity, efficiency, of instantaneous require dismantling: in part, by disrupting the separation of cellularity, by refusing productivist injunctions, by inducing slow speeds and inhabiting silences.

