Cultural Studies of the Americas
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scenes from postmodern life

Beatriz Sarlo

Translated by
Jon Beasley-Murray

Cultural Studies of the Americas — Volume 7

University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis — London

Originally published as *Escenas de la vida posmoderna,* copyright 1994 Compañía Editora Espasa Calpe Argentina S.A.

Published by the University of Minnesota Press
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
http://www.upress.umn.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sarlo, Beatriz.
[Escenas de la vida posmoderna. English]
Scenes from postmodern life / Beatriz Sarlo ; translated by Jon Beasley-Murray.
p. cm. (Cultural studies of the Americas ; v. 7)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-8166-3008-9 (HC : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-8166-3009-7 (PB : alk. paper)
1. Argentina—Civilization—1955– 2. Arts—Argentina.
3. Television broadcasting—Social aspects—Argentina.
4. Intellectuals—Argentina. I. Title. II. Series.
F2849.2 .S22813 2001
982.03'5—dc21

2001004001

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

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11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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City

In many cities there is no center. By *center* I mean a precise geographic location, marked by monuments and crossroads at which specific streets and avenues intersect, that has theaters, cinemas, restaurants, cafés, pedestrian spaces, and illuminated signs sparkling in the luminous and metallic fluid that bathes the buildings. It may have been arguable whether the center really ended at such and such a street or whether it extended a little farther, but no one would have denied the actual existence of a single center: a place of distinct images and sounds, with its own timetable. A trip to the center from the suburbs was once a special occasion, undertaken on a public holiday, as a night out, a shopping expedition, or, simply, as a chance to see and be in the center. Yet today Los Angeles, that immense decentered city, is not as incomprehensible as it was in the sixties. Many Latin American cities, including Buenos Aires, have embarked upon a process of "Los Angelization."

People today belong more to urban neighborhoods (and to "media neighborhoods") than they did in the twenties, when a trip to the center promised to open up a horizon of desires and dangers, in the exploration of a territory that would always be special. Nobody now leaves middle-class neighborhoods to go to the center. Distances have been cut, not only because the city has stopped growing, but also because people no longer move

through the city from one point to another. Richer neighborhoods have formed their own centers, which are cleaner, more organized, more secure, and better lit, and which offer more material and symbolic goods.

Going to the center is not the same as going to a shopping center, even if the signifier *center* is repeated in the two expressions. In the first place, the landscape is different. The shopping center or mall, whatever its architectural design, is a scaled-down simulation of a city of services, from which all the extremes of urban experience have been eliminated. The mall eliminates the weather, which was only ever ameliorated rather than eradicated by nineteenth-century passages and arcades. The mall regularizes sound, which never used to be harmonized into any unified program. It softens the play of light and shadow that used to result from the clash of different and opposed light sources contradicting, reinforcing, or simply passing each other by. We no longer experience the huge sense of scale produced by multistory buildings, by cinema or theater frontages two or three stories high, and by glassed surfaces three, four, or five times bigger than the grandest of stores. We no longer see the old familiar monuments whose permanence, beauty, or ugliness made them the most powerful of signs in the urban text. And gone is the proliferation of writing of giant dimensions, once to be found everywhere: on the tops of buildings, stretching for dozens of meters on their facades; on canopies; in huge letters attached to the glass of dozens of entrance and exit doors; or on glittering sheets of metal. There were once coats of arms, placards painted on the lintels of doorways, banners, posters, impromptu signs, printed advertisements, and traffic signposting. All these characteristics, some produced by chance, others by design, are (or were) the mark of urban identity.

Today, and in opposition to this downtown landscape, the mall's project is to construct a space capsule whose structuring aesthetic is that of the market. There is a way in which all shopping centers are the same: in Minneapolis, Miami Beach, Chevy Chase, Newport, or on Rodeo Drive; in Santa Fe or

Coronel Díaz, Buenos Aires. If you were a visitor from Mars, only the currency of the banknotes and the language spoken by merchants, customers, and bystanders could give any indication as to where in the world you were. The constant presence of international brands and merchandise makes for the uniformity of this space without qualities. What we have here is an interplanetary flight to Cacharel, Stephanel, Fiorucci, Kenzo, Guess, and McDonalds, in a spaceship whose insignia is the united colors of the world's labels.

The space capsule can be paradise or nightmare. Air conditioners recycle and clean its air, and the temperature is always mild. The lighting is functional and avoids producing any potentially menacing conflict of light and shadow, while other threats are neutralized by the closed-circuit TV, through which information flows to the panopticon occupied by the security personnel. As in a spaceship, here you can perform all of the activities needed to keep life going: You eat, you drink, you rest, and you consume symbols and merchandise in line with rules that are unwritten but absolutely clear. As in a spaceship, any sense of direction is easily lost: What you see from one position looks so much like what can be seen from any other position that only experts who are familiar with the little details, or people who wander about with map in hand, are able to say where they are at all times. In any case, knowing where you are at each moment loses its importance: You do not make your way through the mall from one point to another as you do in a street or passageway. You have to walk around a mall willing to accept, if not always or completely, the hazards of chance. If you do not accept these hazards, then you are altering the mall's spatial law, its design in which unsought advances, retreats, and repetitions make up a whole sales strategy.

A mall, if it is a good mall, conforms to an overarching order but should at the same time give the idea of freedom of movement. This is the market's ordered drift. If your use of the mall is limited to entering, arriving at a certain point, making a purchase, and leaving straightaway, then you are contradicting the functions of its spatial arrangement, which has much

in common with a Möbius strip: You are to go from one surface to another, from one plane to another without the sensation of crossing any limit. This arrangement explains precisely why it is hard to lose your way: The mall is not designed to enable you to arrive at any specific point, and consequently sets up an unhierarchical space in which it is also hard to tell whether or not you are lost. The mall is not a labyrinth from which you would have to look for a way out; far from it, and comparisons between the mall and a labyrinth are superficial. The mall is a capsule in which, though you may fail to find what you are looking for, you will absolutely never get lost. Only very small children can lose their way in a mall, in that they may accidentally be separated from other people, and for them this absence is not redressed by the presence of merchandise.

Like a spaceship, the mall has an *indifferent* relation to the city that surrounds it. The city is always the space outside, whether it takes the form of a highway with a slum at its side, a grand avenue, a suburb, or a pedestrian space. Inside the mall, nobody need care whether the store window, through which a sought-for object is spied, is parallel or perpendicular to a street outside. At most, what matters is remembering which little part of the spaceship shelters the desired merchandise. Alongside the destruction of any sense of orientation within the mall, the city's geography also disappears completely. Unlike space capsules, malls have their walls sealed off against any view of outside. More like Las Vegas casinos (and malls have learned much from Las Vegas), in a mall there is no distinction between day and night. Time does not pass, or at least what time does pass is also a time without qualities.

For the mall, built to replace the city, the city no longer exists. Hence the mall spares no thought for its surroundings. So it is not simply that the mall demurely cloisters its precincts off from any views of the outside; it is more that it constitutes an invasion, as if it were dropped from the sky upon the city block that it then brazenly proceeds to ignore. Either that or it is stuck in the middle of empty ground at the side of a highway, in some place with no urban past. When a mall does occupy a space marked by history (as when markets, docks, or port warehouses are converted and recycled, or even in the case of still more cannibalistic recycling, such as with commercial arcades that become arcade malls), this space is put to decorative rather than architectural use. Almost always, and even in the case of "conservationist" malls that keep the older architecture intact, the mall is part and parcel of an evacuation of urban memory, because it represents new customs and does not have to pay tribute to tradition. The wind of novelty makes its force felt wherever the market unfolds.

A mall is all about the future. It builds new habits, by converting itself into a point of reference, making the city accommodate its presence, and familiarizing people with the ways in which they should function in the mall. The mall contains a "premonitory project of the future": There are ever larger malls that, like factory ships, you never have to leave (thus there are already some hotel–spa–cultural center malls in Los Angeles and, of course, Las Vegas). Soon there will be mall-towns, mall-museums, mall-libraries and schools, and mall-hospitals.

We are told that citizenship is formed in the marketplace and that, as a result, malls can be seen as monuments to a new civic sensibility: They are *agora,* combinations of temple and market just like the forum of ancient Rome. The forum had its orators and audiences, its politicians and the plebeians who were the targets of their manipulations. In malls, too, citizens play diverse roles: Some shop, while others simply watch and admire. If in nineteenth-century arcades we find capitalism's archaeology, in malls we see its fullest realization.

By contrast with the real city, which has been built up over time, the mall's version of a small-scale service city comes to us sovereignly independent from tradition or environs. Being a city in miniature, the mall has an air of unreality, because it has been built too quickly, without having to undergo any vacillation, any progress or delay, any adjustments, destructions, or influences from broader projects. History is absent, and even when there is some mark of historicity, there is none of

that impassioned conflict that results when the impulse of the present is set against a resistant past. History is given a subservient role and becomes banal decoration, as in the fetishistic preservation of a few walls to serve as architectural shell. The mall is therefore perfectly in tune with the decorative passion of so-called postmodern architecture. Purportedly preservationist malls treat history paradoxically as souvenir rather than as material support of an identity and a temporality that would always set off some conflict in the present.

Once history has been evacuated to become mere "detail," the mall suffers an amnesia without which the smooth advancement of its business would be impossible. If the traces of history were too evident and went beyond their decorative function, the mall would experience a conflict of functions and meanings: The mall's semiotic machinery has to be that provided by its project alone. By contrast, history abounds with meanings that the mall has no interest in conserving. After all, in the space of the mall it is not meanings that count, but signifiers.

Malls provide perfect evidence for the hypothesis of a contemporary nomadism: People who have worked their way around a mall once can use any other in a different city, even abroad, without ever having to learn the local language or customs. Temporarily nomadic masses borne on the flows of tourism find in a mall the sweetness of home in that the accidents of difference and misunderstanding are erased. After a voyage through unfamiliar cities, the mall is an oasis where everything goes on just as at home. When tourists find themselves drained by exoticism's delights, they can find peace in the familiarity of spaces that are the same as anywhere else, but whose attractiveness is enhanced by the knowledge that they are "abroad." Without malls and without Club Meds, mass tourism would be unthinkable: Both provide the security felt only in your own house without completely losing the emotion produced by the fact of leaving home behind. When a foreign space, in its sheer resistance to communication, is as threatening as a desert, the mall offers the palliative of familiarity.

But this familiarity is not the only or even the most important of the mall's contributions to nomadism. On the contrary, the mall as a perfect machine that operates according to fuzzy logic is itself a playing field for deterritorialized drift. Its points of reference are universal: Its logos, acronyms, texts, and manners do not require their interpreters to be settled in any culture previous to or distinct from that of the market. Thus the mall produces an extraterritorial culture from which nobody can feel excluded. Even petty consumers manage perfectly in the mall, inventing various unforeseen uses for it that the machine tolerates to the extent that these uses do not divert the energies that the mall administers. In the richer parts of town I have seen women from the suburbs sitting on the sides of flower tubs, right next to the overflowing tables of a food court, feeding their babies while other children run among the counters with a two-liter plastic bottle of Coca-Cola. I have seen them take homemade sandwiches from plastic bags marked with international brands, bags that no doubt have been successively recycled from the moment they left the stores, fulfilling the laws of a first "legitimate" use. The mall machine did not foresee these visitors, though it does not actively expel them; they are extraterritorial, and yet the extraterritoriality of the mall itself allows them a curiously paradoxical plebeian liberty. Faithful to the market's universality, the mall operates according to a principle of nonexclusivity.

This extraterritoriality offers advantages for the poorest members of society, who lack a city that is clean and safe, with good services, where they can walk around at any time of day. The poor live in suburbs from which the State has retreated, and where poverty prevents the market from taking the State's place. They bear the brunt of the crisis of local neighborhoods, the deterioration of community solidarities, and violence's anecdotal everydayness. Malls are precisely an exaggerated and condensed realization of qualities opposed to these traits of urban poverty. Moreover, entering this extraterritorial space requires no special visas. For the other end of the social spectrum, the mall's extraterritoriality could infringe upon what

middle and upper strata of society consider to be their rights, yet the mall's timetabled and stratified patterns of use prevent the collision of these two distinct claims upon it. The poor go there on the weekend, when the slightly better off and the rich prefer to be elsewhere. One and the same space changes according to the day and time, demonstrating that transsocial quality that some consider to be the hallmark of postmodernity.

The mall's extraterritoriality also fascinates the very young, precisely because of the possibility it gives of drifting through the world of mercantile signifiers. The mall displays the richest of scenographies for brand-name fetishism. Here, at least in theory, there is no lack; on the contrary, malls need excess to an extent that surprises even the most erudite of cognoscenti. This scenography reveals the mall's Disney World face: As in Disney World, all your favorite characters are there, all of them showing off what made them famous. The mall is an exhibition of all the objects of your dreams.

This space without urban references is instead full of "neocultural" references, which allow the uninitiated to learn a kind of "know-how" acquired just by being there. The market, in empowering freedom of choice (however much this may only be an imaginary taking of sides), provides an education in subjects that are functional for its own dynamic, while also suiting young people's desire to be free from institutions. Adolescents know more about malls than anyone else does, and they can apply an antisentimental sentimentality in their enthusiasm for the exhibitionism and freedom of movement that controlled disorder promotes. The brands and labels that make up the mall landscape replace the array of public or religious symbols now entering into decline. Moreover, for kids caught by the "high-tech" bug of computers, malls offer a space that seems "high tech" however much, in its suburban exemplars, this may be an aesthetic effect rather than a real functional quality. Furthermore, malls combine the iconographic fullness of their amassed brand names with the "artesanal" brands of some folk-ecological-natural products, thus making for the sum of styles that defines an adolescent aesthetic: industrial kitsch meets compact disc.

The speed with which malls have imposed themselves upon urban culture makes this a change in our customs unlike any other, even in this century so marked by the vagaries of the market and shifting values. It may be argued that this change is superficial and cannot be compared to other social upheavals, but I believe that it synthesizes basic characteristics of what is to come or, rather, of what is already here to stay. In cities that are coming apart and breaking down, this refuge against atomization is perfectly suited to the mood of an epoch. Where institutions and the public sphere can no longer construct landmarks that are considered eternal, a monument has arisen whose premise is precisely the speed of commercial flow. Malls hold up a mirror that reflects a crisis of public space in which it is difficult to construct meanings; and the reflected image is an inverted one, in which an ordered torrent of signifiers flows day and night.

Market

The following conversation was overheard a little while ago, on a Sunday midafternoon, in an emptying restaurant. The girl's parents were asking her what she wanted for her birthday.

"You know already," the girl said. "The operation you promised me last year, on my fourteenth birthday."

Hoping to change her mind, they offered her instead a month on a Caribbean beach; skiing holidays for her and a friend; private lessons in aerobic skating or hang gliding; running shoes either with a tachometer or a built-in pump, or in an older style with a thin sole trimmed with satin and lined with synthetic sable perfect for après-ski; permission for her boyfriend to sleep over every night; an original Calvin Klein party dress; a superlight compact disc player she could carry in her purse; a life-size inflatable Axl Rose doll; a life-size inflatable Luis Miguel doll; a passive exercise bed and solarium; contact lenses in green, steel gray, and turquoise; a life-size hologram of her head; a mural for her room of the first photograph taken of her after her birth; a haircut; permanent eyeliner and dyed eyebrows; a party at the nightclub of her choosing; a giant Sarah Kay bear.

"I want the operation," the girl insisted.

"I think your hips are developed just fine for your age," her mother reasoned.

"I don't like my bottom," the girl said with certainty.

"I don't see anything special about it," said her little brother.

"Exactly," she said stubbornly.

"You're still too young to decide," said the father.

"All my friends have had something done or are going to do something to celebrate their fifteenth birthday, and I don't want to be the stupid one left behind."

"What's stupid is having the operation," said the little brother, "seeing how much it must hurt."

"Nobody understands me," said the girl.

Her father became serious: "We understand you perfectly; nobody should be denied their rights, but it will end up being very expensive."

"It will turn out being even more expensive when nobody loves me, when nobody takes my photo on the beach, and when I don't appear in the magazines. That'll be expensive, the amount wasted on therapy and the fact that I won't be able to work at anything when I'm older."

"She has something there," said her mother.

"There was never any question about how much your facelift cost," the girl said, not realizing she had no need to attack her allies.

"I paid for my facelift; I went to the clinic with a purse full of notes and still there was money to spare."

"Who knows where you took it from," the girl said.

"Money doesn't smell," said her little brother.

"I took the money from the study," said the mother.

"From whose study?" asked the brother.

"Idiot, this boy is an idiot," said the father.

"The way I am, with this flat bottom, I'm ashamed even of going to school. All the girls have had something done: nose jobs, cheekbones raised, lower lips enlarged, forehead-minimizing hair implants, chintucks, breast implants, breasts reshaped, pubic-hair electrolysis, lower ribs sawn off, hips

seen to, bottoms raised, toes straightened, insteps lifted, wrists reduced, pectoral muscle implants, arms reshaped, bones lengthened, necks stretched, skin peels with natural acids. And what if I were asking for hair implants? That's much worse, because you don't know if you're going to keep using them. That really is throwing money away, like on this moron's tattoos."

"Leave me out of it," her little brother shot back.

"We're not millionaires," said her mother.

"What's that got to do with my present? Since I've started high school you've had the bags under your eyes removed, a nose job, two collagen injections, and an operation on your belly so you could return to a size two. How many birthdays have you had since I started high school? Three. How many operations have you had?"

"But they weren't under general anesthetic, and in any case you two were to blame for the belly."

"Leave me out of it," said the little brother.

"OK," said the father, "but don't ask for anything else until you're eighteen."

"By eighteen I'll be a millionaire living in Miami," said the girl.

Later, her mother mentioned that she would have a couple more touch-ups before anyone noticed her eyelids were drooping a little. "At two touch-ups a year, if I live till I'm seventy-five that's around sixty touch-ups, but you never know what will come up along the way."

The person who really needed an operation was the father. With those bags under his eyes, if he were fired he wouldn't be able to find a decent job anywhere. "This year I'll have an operation too," the father said. "When all's said and done more depends on me than on all of you put together."

We are free. At every step we will be still freer to redesign our bodies. Today it is surgery, tomorrow it will be genetics, and all our dreams come or will come true once more. Whose dreams are these? It is our culture dreaming, and we are the

products of our cultural icons' dreams. We allow ourselves into the dreams of magazine covers, billboards, advertising, and fashion. Each of us lights on a thread promising to lead us to something profoundly personal in the tapestry woven with our absolutely shared desires. This home of dreams, where we can organize fragments from all over to construct the "language of our social identity," compensates for modern society's instability. In our culture's dreams we are part of a patchwork of fragments, a collage of different elements, an always unfinished ensemble of everything, each piece marked by the year that it was cut to shape, the place that it came from, and the original that it tries to imitate.

It is said that identities have been exploded. In their place we see not a vacuum, but the market. The social sciences find that citizenship is also exercised in the market, and that those who cannot carry out their transactions there are left, so to speak, off the edge of the world. Fragments of subjectivity are picked up in this planetary scene of circulation from which the poorest are excluded. The market unifies, selects, and, moreover, produces the illusion of difference through the extramercantile meanings taken on by objects acquired through mercantile exchange. The market is a linguistic system and we all try to speak one or more of its dialects: Our dreams have all too little to play with. Our dreams are made up of bits and pieces found in the market. Centuries ago such bits and pieces had other sources, not necessarily any better. The critique of these dreams was an important motivation for constructing images of alternative societies. Today, then, critique should take as its object the serial dreams of the market.

Desire for the new is by definition inextinguishable. The aesthetic avant-gardes learned something of this desire, in that once the floodgates of tradition, religion, and indisputable authority break open, then the *perpetuum mobile* of the new becomes the operative principle. This principle of perpetual innovation also holds true for the market; indeed, it is truer for the market than for any other sphere.

These days, the subject in a position to enter the market,

with enough money to participate as a consumer, is a type of *collector in reverse*. Instead of collecting the things themselves, she collects the acts of acquiring things. Collectors of the old type take things out of circulation and use in order to hoard them: No stamp collector would send a letter using the stamps from a collection; no connoisseur of lead soldiers would let a child play with them; matchboxes in a collection are not to be used. Traditional collectors know the market value of their possessions (because they have paid for them); or they know the time and labor that has been invested in getting hold of them, if the collection has not been built through sale and purchase. But collectors also know what we could call the syntactic value that these items have as a collection: They know what they need to complete a set, what they would not swap for anything else, and the history behind each individual item. In a traditional collection, valuable items are literally irreplaceable, even if a collector might sacrifice one item to obtain another that is even more valuable.

Collectors in reverse, on the other hand, know that the items they acquire lose value from the moment they come into their hands. An object's value begins to erode, and the force of attraction that once made things shine in the market showplace fades. Once acquired, merchandise loses its soul (whereas in a collection, by contrast, things have a soul that becomes richer the more the collection is enriched: Collections give value to old age). No object could be adequate to the desire of the collector in reverse, because there will always be another object of attraction. What are collected are acts of sale and purchase—perfectly incandescent, glorious moments. North Americans, who know something of these vicissitudes of modernity and postmodernity, give the name *shopping spree* to a type of purchasing orgy in which one thing leads to another until exhaustion brings the day to a close in the department store café. In theory, the shopping spree is an impulse that cannot be held back so long as there are still the economic means to keep going. It is precisely a collection of acts of consumption in which the object is consumed before it is even touched by use.

At the opposite pole from collectors in reverse are those excluded from the market, who range from those who can at any rate dream of imaginary consumption to those so excluded that poverty pens them in, confining them to the most minimal of fantasies. These people wear things out through consumption; acquisition alone does not make them lose interest, as they see using an object as a fundamental dimension of its possession. But leaving aside the case of these people who have not been invited to the party, nowadays the desire for things is almost inextinguishable for those who have understood the game and are in a position to play it.

Material objects escape us. At times because we cannot grasp them, at times because we already have them in our grasp, but they always escape us. Identity's impermanence affects collectors in reverse as much as it does the less favored imaginary collectors: Both think that material objects compensate (or would compensate) for some lack. In each case, this lack that is to be filled exists not so much at the level of possession, but rather at the level of identity. Thus objects signify *us*: There are meanings they can grant us, and these are meanings we are ready to accept. A traditionalist would say that this is a case of a world turned completely upside down. But when religion, ideology, politics, the traditional bonds of community, and modern social relations all fail to offer any foundation for the construction of identity or any adequate ground for value, then the market steps in to provide a space of universal freedom, giving us something to replace the gods that failed. Material objects become our icons when the symbolic power of other icons, which used to represent some divinity, is seen to wane; they are our icons because they can create an imagined community, a community of consumers, whose sacred book is advertising, whose ritual is the shopping spree, whose temple is the mall, and whose law is fashion.

Still, objects escape us, and it is not just those who cannot enter the market with confidence, or those who cannot even take part, who find that objects elude their desire. The same quality that makes material objects desirable also makes them

volatile. Their instability finds its source precisely in the sacred book of advertising and in the knowledges codified each season in the encyclopedia of fashion. Material objects gain their value because they change constantly; paradoxically, they also lose their value because they change constantly. They stop being part of the fabric of life. None of us would want to use a pair of old sneakers just because we had once been happy wearing them. Sometimes sentimentalism can save things from disappearing: We keep football shirts, a wedding dress, or our first school uniform. So sentimentalism is a psychological form of collectionism. But in general, the passing of time leaves no sign of distinction, simply the signs of age, and old objects have no defenders equivalent to the conservationists who plead for cities or buildings. Only things in the public domain call for preservation. In the private sphere, objects age rapidly, and only perfect design could save them from this aging process. But not even perfect design can truly save them, as objects that have been designed perfectly end up in museums or collections, while objects of "common" design (generally those that particularly bear the signs that they were once in fashion) are only kept when they cannot be replaced by other, newer and better, objects.

Time has been abolished when it comes to the market's everyday objects, not because they are eternal but rather because they are *completely transitory.* They last only so long as their symbolic value does not completely wear off because, in addition to being commodities, they are also hypersignifying objects. In the past, only objects of (civil or religious) worship or works of art had this ability to add to their use value a surplus value of meaning that made them more significant. Today this is true of the market, as much as it is of religion or power. The market gives material objects a symbolic surplus that is fleeting but is as powerful as any other symbol. Things give rise to a meaning that goes beyond utility or beauty, or rather their utility or beauty are byproducts of a meaningfulness derived from the hierarchy of the market. It is not just a matter of chance that material objects at the center and summit of

this hierarchy are more beautiful (better designed) than those that form the base or the intermediate levels of the pyramid. It is true that the market is not just some ship of fools that judges excellence on the basis of a label without taking notice of a thing's qualities. Nevertheless, the perceived excellence of a brand, a label, or a signature always has some other foundation beyond its material qualities, its functionality, or its design perfection.

All this is common knowledge. Yet material objects keep on escaping us. They have become so valuable for the construction of identity, so central to the discourse of fantasy, and they stigmatize so terribly those who do not have them, that they seem to be made of the same resistant and intangible material as dreams. In the face of an unstable, fragmentary reality that undergoes processes of the most rapid metamorphoses, material objects are an anchor, albeit a paradoxical anchor that itself has to change with time, to rust and decay, becoming obsolescent the day of its first use. The power of objects is built on these paradoxes. Likewise, the freedom of those who consume them arises out of the market's ironclad need to turn us into permanent consumers. Our materialist dreams are free, but it is the most powerful of persuaders that has the ear of this freedom and speaks to us through it.

The world of material objects has grown and will keep growing. Up until a few decades ago, commodities had an external materiality and only exceptionally did they enter into the intimacy of our bodies. Nowadays, the market is like an inexorably rising tide, flooding every territory imaginable. We dream of things that will alter our bodies, and this is the happiest and most terrifying of dreams. Desire, which has yet to find itself calmed even temporarily by any material object, has found in the objectification of the body itself the ne plus ultra to unite the myths of beauty and youth. A race against time is on, and the market proposes the consoling fiction that age can be deferred and perhaps, if not today then maybe tomorrow, defeated forever.

If the indignity surrounding commodities' aging has removed temporality from our daily life (the time of material objects only counts for those who cannot replace them with other, newer ones), now we are offered objects that change our bodies. Prostheses, synthetics, and artificial aids are introduced into the body through operations that modify it according to design standards that vary every five years (who now wants the flat chests that were the vogue ten years ago, or the daintiness of the sixties?). When on public display, bodies should be perfectly functional and resistant to age, as was once expected of commodities. There is no reason to reject this surgical technology, and so to reprise the scandalized reaction of decent nineteenth-century women who refrained from dyeing their hair. It is not a question of being horrified today by operations that in ten years' time we ourselves will consider innocent. We have to question, however, what it is that society is searching for in these transformations produced by corporeal engineering or market design.

Who is it that speaks as we dream of beauty? What will happen to us if we manage not only to prolong life, but also, to put it simply, to abolish death?

Youth

There is much to say about costume, and the art of disguise. At nightclubs, in the early hours of the morning, the young enact their own form of ceremony. Here is the carnival that we all once thought had disappeared from urban culture for good. Yet the end of the century unearths it again, dressed up to go out at night.

Let there be no confusion: The girl over there who looks like a prostitute from the pages of a Spanish *movida* or "new wave" cartoon, is simply wearing a mask. She is disguised as a prostitute, but it would be a complete misunderstanding to confuse her with a real prostitute (who, by contrast, would not be done up like her, but would be dressed to look like a model). To confuse her with a prostitute would be like going to a carnival in the 1920s and making the mistake of believing that the "old dame" or the "Russian ballerina" had in fact

come from the eighteenth century or was indeed Russian. The girl over there has made up her face and has adorned her body with a series of signs that no longer signify what they used to: Her transparent black blouse is not a transparent black blouse; the purple lips are not purple lips; the almost-bared breasts are not bared breasts; nor are the military boots, military boots; and the uncompromising miniskirt, right up to her thighs and pubis, is not a miniskirt. The girl has picked a mask for use in the small hours. This is not some version of her mother's party dress, nor the outcome of a negotiation between a princess's outfit and her family's economic possibilities. Her style of dress owes nothing to any fashion except that set by the tastes of teenage nightclubs; this style is nothing like that of the young women of the fifties whose aim when they dressed to drink tea at a boîte would have been to be kitsch copies of their mothers or of ladies they had seen in films. Like her male friend (with his T-shirt painted in more or less Rasta colors, the tattoo on his biceps, and his earrings) the girl over there is wearing a costume specific to the nightclub, a disguise on whose terrain humor and eroticism collide.

The carnival's pure exteriority produces an effect of superficiality, in which everything is completely on view. Here fashion sets out to denude, breaking away from its traditional function of oscillating between the seen and the unseen. Dressing up to party is the apotheosis of insinuation, as the nightclub disguise almost completely achieves an ideal of total visibility. In dressing up to party, there can be no compromise with anything outside the chosen outfit's semantic system: Shoes, purse, jewels, and perfume all have to be part of whatever it is that the outfit signifies. The costume gains life from a certain discontinuity, and its surprising beauty comes from the art of the unforeseen, from a combinatorial fantasy more than from the canon. Like hippie clothing of the sixties, nightclub costume does not shrink from combining differing temporalities and origins: retropunk, retroromantic, retrocabaret, retrofolk, retromilitary, retro–Titanes in the Ring, retro-Rasta, gigolo, femme fatale, demimondaine, or Almodóvar prostitute. As in carnivalesque disguise (which Madonna reproduces with deliberate faithfulness), the prefix *retro* is a basic trait of a style based more in recycling than in the production of the totally new. Its originality is syntactic, evoking collage and not refusing the strategy of the "ready-made."

The girl's dress mixes two temporal points of reference. There is a counterpoint between the body and its costume. The clothes are not chosen to flatter the body, which would be in line with an easy calculus that has historically only allowed certain liberties to certain bodies—the more perfect the body, the freer the choice of fashion to cover it. On the contrary, the girl first chooses her costume and only then layers, swathes, and drapes it on a body that has to adapt to the costume because the costume is more important than the body, even though the body is freely on display. The girl's choice is not based upon thinking through what suits her best. Instead, she has put on the costume that she likes best or, simply, the one she ought to wear. The idea of carnival takes precedence over other ideas, and in the carnival what flatters bodily beauty has to give way to the imperative that bodies should come out transfigured by costume. There are things that can be seen only in a nightclub; a party dress, on the other hand, could be worn to the theater or at a wedding.

In the old days, stars of popular culture never used to dress differently when they gave a concert. For Doris Day or Bing Crosby, only a surplus charge of glamour, rather than any particular outfit, set them apart from conventional Western fashion as decreed by the catwalks or in magazines. When Gardel dressed as a gaucho or Maurice Chevalier wore his boulevardier outfit of straw hat and bowtie, it was still clear that this was just decorative excess that could not and would not be taken any further, beyond the stage.

Since the sixties, by contrast, rock culture has turned dress into a central feature of style. Rock was always more than a musical genre, and from the outset it was animated by the pulse of a counterculture whose effects would be felt even in everyday life. Rock's identity was extramusical: Sustained by

the music, rock culture staked out a terrain of mobilization, resistance, and experimentation. Drugs, which had been part of the private habits of curious members of the bourgeoisie, of decadent poets, dandies, and those who wished to explore subjectivity, became part of rock culture. Within rock culture, drug use became a mixture of public assertion and a limit that had to be crossed. Even today, the collective imagination makes a moralistic and invidious association between young people and drugs. Rock was a form of defiance for the young (perhaps the last such), and those who pointed to its subversive potential founded on the emergence of libertarian ideologies were right. Rock's rebelliousness heralded a spirit of contestation that was part and parcel of the movement that saw waves of young people entering the political scene at the end of the sixties. The protagonists in rock and in politics may not have been the same, but even if they were different, even when they took no notice of each other, they were part of the same cultural climate.

Rock has fulfilled one of its possible destinies: No longer program, it has become style. Rock's delayed expansion into less rebellious youth culture comes complete with the recycling of romantic, Satanic, and exceptionalist myths. As style, it presents itself as a resource for the market, which takes up rock's founding fathers to underline their pop elements. Moreover, this process of assimilation is not new; it has been part of the script as one way in which rock circulated from its beginning. Brothers and enemies, rock and pop traveled along intersecting paths even when rock's aesthetic quality was at its highest. So rock has become a resource available for anyone to plunder. It has become just one stratum of modern culture, its subversive aspects erased with the death of its heroes or now that the survivors from the old days are taking up more pietistic discourses (turning to ecology, naturalism, spirituality, or New Age beliefs).

Become style (and the same thing happened to the historic avant-gardes), rock is now cited by every strain of youth culture. If rock, like the hippies, found in dress a mark of exceptionality, nowadays the idea of dress as a means of differentiation between cultural tribes has spread everywhere, in all sorts of permutations. Style indicators come and go, as black windjammers return for a season, punk's lights and shadows might be the rage in cosmetics, skinhead outrages are recycled in tattoos, leather displaces jeans, jeans displace leather, Brylcremed DAs replace shaved necks, and kids who are no doubt racist at heart dress in Bob Marley T-shirts. Dress comes to attract attention through its boisterously obsolescent splendor and its sovereign arbitrariness.

So the girl in the nightclub testifies to a form of amnesia. She pays no heed to the origin of the styles that mesh on her body. Her costume has no past (just as "Russian ballerina" dress signified neither folkloric dance nor Russian nationality), and it is not the semantic meaning of the elements brought together that differentiates her, but their syntactic articulation. Her costume is pure form, and it distinguishes itself from "legitimate" fashion form in that it aspires not to universality but rather to a particular social subset. It is a mark of her age and her status as a youth, rather than of her social or financial status. The girl and her costume bring to fruition and take us back to something whose outline could already be seen in the fifties: This is "youth style." Youth here is not a category that refers to age; it is an aesthetic of everyday life.

Childhood has almost disappeared, pushed out by an increasingly early adolescence. Youth is prolonged until thirty. A third of life is spent under the heading of youth, a heading as conventional as any other. Everyone knows that these boundaries, though taken to be precise markers, have changed over time.

In 1900 an immigrant woman who already had two children would not have been thought *particularly* young at sixteen, and her husband, ten years older, would have been fully an adult. In the past, the poor were hardly ever young people, and the nature of their world meant that they passed from childhood to the culture of work without any transitional stage. Those who did not follow this itinerary were classified

as dangerous exceptions: They were juvenile delinquents, their photographs making them look like little adults, producing a similar effect as photographs of stunted children. Here youth was regarded not so much as a source of value than as a sign of danger (a habit of thinking shed by criminology but maintained by the police to the present day).

Yet in 1918, students in Córdoba, Argentina, initiated a movement for university reform, formulating their demands on behalf of young people. Latin American intellectuals in the first decades of the twentieth century, such as José Ingenieros, José Enrique Rodó, Alfredo Palacios, and Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, believed that they were speaking for the young, and they found that instituting a dialogue with the young could profit those who wished to set themselves up as their mentors. The leaders of the Cuban revolution and those who marched through Paris in May 1968 also identified themselves as young people. Yet the leaders of the 1917 Russian Revolution, at the same age, had not been young: Revolutionary youth at the beginning of the century believed that they had to fulfill obligations rather than demand special rights. Their messianism was that of the Latin American guerrillas in that it valorized a moral tone or political imperative that required the young to act as historical actors who would be more daring, free from all traditional ties.

By contrast, earlier the Romantics found youth to make an aesthetic and political argument. Rimbaud, at the cost of silence and exile, invented the modern myth of youth as transsexual, innocent, and perverse. The Argentine avant-gardes of the twenties practiced a style of intervention later judged juvenile; by contrast, Bertolt Brecht was never young, nor were Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, or Roland Barthes. Photographs of Sartre, Raymond Aron, and Simone de Beauvoir when they were barely twenty years old give off a posed gravity, with which those pictured hoped to dispel any notion of that immaturity that so fascinated Gombrowicz. We were young, said Nizan, but let nobody tell me that the twenties are the time of your life. David Viñas was not *particularly* young

when, at twenty-seven, he edited the journal *Contorno,* in which the category of "youth" was stigmatized by Juan José Sebreli, himself two or three years younger than Viñas; when they talked of a "new generation" they used this label to mark an ideological difference that would be quite complete without any resort to a vindication of youth.

Orson Welles was not *all that* young when he directed *Citizen Kane* at twenty-four. Luis Buñuel, Alfred Hitchcock, and Ingmar Bergman never made any "young cinema" in the way that Jim Jarmusch or Jean-Luc Godard have done. Greta Garbo, Louise Brooks, Ingrid Bergman, and María Félix were never teenagers; even when they were *very* young, they always appeared to be *only* young people. Audrey Hepburn was the first teenager in American cinema: Only child prodigies were younger. Frank Sinatra and Miles Davis were never young in the way that the Beatles were. Even Elvis Presley did not stage his youth as his most valuable asset, in that although he appealed strongly to teenagers, his subversion had more to do with sexuality than with youth. Jimi Hendrix never seemed to be as young as that eternal youth, the aged youth and frozen teenager, Mick Jagger.

Before jeans and miniskirts, there was no such thing as youth fashion, nor was there a market in which it could circulate. Mary Quant, Lee, and Levi's constitute the academy for this new design. Up until 1960, the young imitated, stylized or, at most, parodied what was, simply, fashion. So photos of younger actors, football players, or university students before this time fail to evoke the now commonplace iconography of perverse altar boys or rockers ready for anything. This iconography is only a quarter of a century old. Models in advertising used to imitate actresses or the upper class; now models imitate younger models, and actresses imitate models. It is only with men that maturity retains some sexual magnetism. Madonna provides an original challenge because she takes on retro fashion without incorporating the elements of youth style. She originated a form of costume or disguise, worn only by the young, that complicates the meanings of teenage brands that

are here brought together to make up a fashion that displays the stylistic traits that have built up over the past half century.

Today youth has more prestige than ever, in a manner that befits cultures whose hierarchical principles have been destabilized. Childhood no longer adequately sustains illusions of happiness, of the pacifying suspension of sexuality and innocence. The category of "youth," on the other hand, guarantees another *set of illusions*, with the advantage that sexuality can be summoned onto the scene and at the same time be deployed freer of its adult obligations, among which is a black-and-white definition of sex. So we all want to dwell indefinitely in this territory constituted by youth. But the "young" expel all phonies from this territory, casting out those who do not fulfill the conditions of age; they then engage in a generational war made banal by cosmetics, by the unending cycle of cosmetic surgery every five years, and by "New Age" therapies.

Youth culture, universal and tribal at the same time, is constructed in the context of an institution, traditionally dedicated to the young, that is now in crisis. This is the school, whose prestige has been weakened as much by the breakdown of traditional authorities as by the conversion of the mass media into a space of symbolic abundance that the schools cannot match. With this breakdown in authority, the strategies once employed to define what is allowed and what is forbidden are in crisis. Permanence, once authority's constitutive trait, is cut short by the flux of novelty. When it is almost impossible to define what is allowed and what is forbidden, morality ceases being a terrain of significant conflicts, to become a catalogue of banal statements. Authority has lost its terrible and intimidating aspect (which stirred rebellion) and is now only authority when it exercises (as it does with increasing frequency) repressive force. Whereas before, prohibition relied upon discourse and could therefore be confronted, now it seems that only the police remain. What was a few decades ago the site of politics is where, first, social movements appeared, and, now, a fleet of neoreligions gains ground.

The market takes up the baton dropped by authority, and courts the youth it has instituted as protagonist of most of its myths. One could plot a graph on which the rising hegemonic influence of the market and the declining weight of the school would be seen to cross, and this would be a good way to represent a more general tendency. The young graduate from a role as characters within a novel of domesticity that chronicles an ever briefer childhood, and move to the hyperrealist soap opera that stages commodities dancing both for those who can afford to buy them as well as for the other consumers whose only resource is their imagination. For those "imaginary consumers," the new poor, the vision of a life of labor and sacrifice is not such an effective interpellation as it was for their grandparents, among other reasons because it will not even give them what it gave their grandparents, or because they do not want to achieve merely what their grandparents sought.

Whether they be consumers in fact or consumers in imagination, the young discover in the market of commodities and symbolic goods a depository of material objects and hot-off-the-shelf discourses prepared specially for them. The speed of market circulation and its associated accelerated obsolescence combine to form an allegory of youth: In the market, commodities have to be new, have to be fashionably in style, and have to be in tune with the most insignificant changes that are in the air at the time. The incessant renovation needed by the capitalist market captures the myth of permanent novelty that also motivates youth. Never have the needs of the market been so precisely calibrated to its consumers' imaginary as they are today.

The market has two faces: It promises both a form of ideal freedom as well as guaranteed exclusion. Just as racism reveals itself at the doors of certain nightclubs whose bouncers are experts in social differentiations, so the market chooses those who are to be in a position to choose within it. Yet because it has to be universal, the market articulates its discourse as though everyone were equal. The mass media reinforce this idea of equality in liberty that makes up a central part of well-meaning

youth ideologies. In these ideologies, real inequalities are ignored in order to equip a culture that is stratified but at the same time patterned by the magnetic poles of musical identity that become sites at which identity itself is experienced. It is only on its underside, at society's margins, that this conglomeration of strata shows its cracks. In any case, the cracks are bridged symbolically, as videos and pop music create the illusion of a continuity within which socially determined differences are disguised as individual choices. If it is true, as has been said, that idolizing a pop star involves the same kind of love as following a football team, these affects' transclass character pacifies their bearers' consciences. Their consciences suitably pacified, these same people will go on to take a certain snobbish pleasure in making careful distinctions between sheep and goats in line with the same classificatory logic that is found at the nightclub doors. The egalitarian impulse sometimes believed to be found in youth culture reaches its limits in social, racial, sexual, and moral prejudice.

The fact that young people's ties to any community of values are so weak finds its compensation in a more abstract but equally powerful arrangement: A bright and unruffled imaginary picks up on themes that will ensure that, precisely, youth itself is the source of the values through which this same imaginary interpellates the young. The circle is almost perfectly closed.

Video Games

I enter a place that combines the sound of a nightclub with the lighting of a dockside bar. Its patrons look variously as though they have come straight from high school, from a slum, or from offices where they work at the lowest grade of specialization and salary. They are each absorbed in what they are doing, and their eyes never meet. From time to time one or another of them will walk to the counter at the back and make a transaction; whoever it is serving them distrusts his clients, preferring to maintain only the most indispensable of contacts. I am the only woman in the place. Later, two girls enter who appear to be friends of one of the students.

The room's walls are painted in psychedelic colors, apple green, yellow, and violet; the light coming from spotlights hung from the ceiling bounces off these planes of color, and there are also some shimmering neon signs, rays, stars, and spirals. But who cares, because no one looks at either the walls or floor; no one has time to look around. They know that there is little to see. The sound of the music, a repetitive beat with few variations overlaid by the briefest of simple melodies that also repeats itself without variations, mixes with another series of sounds: whistles, metallic shocks, deafening crashes, brief waves of electronic sound, rattles, synthesizer chords, gunshot sounds, indecipherable voices, boing, bang, and clash, all sounding like a cartoon soundtrack.

The ceiling spotlights compete with other sources of light: glints, rays, abrupt illuminations, total blackouts, varying planes of color, and halos that reflect on walls and bodies. These are light effects that draw attention to themselves, whose value lies in what they are and not in what they make visible around them. These light effects are like things in themselves, filling the place and converting it into a hologram. Without the light and sound, the place would be empty, because the truth is that these effects are its furniture. This is a light scene in which each square yard offers a clearly delimited arrangement of color and sound, which enables each person to stay self-absorbed in his or her own space.

If I take up a position near one of the patrons, a little to one side, so that I can see what he is doing, he does not divert his gaze, and this lack of contact lets me assume I am not too much of a nuisance. His eyes are preoccupied with a video screen, his hands apart, deftly operating the joysticks and buttons of a control panel. Occasionally a movement of the head lets me suppose some surprise, contradiction, or happiness, but in general these are hardly demonstrative people. They are absorbed and preoccupied by the visual arrangement of the

screen as it changes, registering the immediate results of their actions or the inscrutable decisions of the computer chips.

Every three, four, or five minutes it starts all over again. Some letters appear on the screen to show that even if everything seems to go on the same forever, in fact the counter is back at zero and you have to begin building your score up from scratch. The machines constitute an *infinite recurrence*, every so often finishing a cycle and starting up another that is basically identical, but that is at the same time characterized by its variations. Like an infinite recurrence, these variations hypnotically coax you to aim for an unreachable limit, beyond which a player would beat the machine.

On the other side of the room is a more archaic world. Vertical and horizontal panels, kitted out in the pop aesthetic of fifties' graphic art, offer surfaces covered with obstacles (mushrooms, bridges, pits, rails, mazes, and arches), around which runs a metal ball, advancing, retreating, and disappearing. It advances, retreats, and disappears, but in doing so it makes music, the music played by the player with her hands by the sides of the horizontal panel, who is preventing the sphere from falling into the well in which it will be stuck until everything goes back to the beginning once again. I notice that the players bang and tilt the machine, pushing its legs and sides, controlling it with all their bodies, not just with their hands alone. Various parts of the vertical panel are lit up, to show pictures of animals, midgets, roulette wheels, spaceships, gorillas, jungles, beaches, swimming pools, women, soldiers, dinosaurs, and athletes. These pictures are real pictures, unlike the geometric figures on most of the screens, and the sounds also have an air of reality in that the sphere in motion physically hits against the mushrooms or the metal rails.

These machines (the ones without screens) are reminiscent of a casino: Las Vegas in a six-by-three-foot space. I mean more than just that the casinos of Las Vegas are full of machines like this, and of screens like those lining the opposite wall; rather I mean that each of these machines combines the sounds and lights, the repetition, concentration, and infinite

recurrence of a casino. What is more, they copy the Las Vegas aesthetic (or perhaps it would be better to say that Las Vegas and these machines share the same aesthetic).

I retrace my steps and come to the exit. On either side of the door are two huge screens showing a ball game. Just like on television, here the score appears at the bottom of the screen, identifying the teams by the color of their shirts. After watching a slice of this truly infinite and recurrent match, a man next to me goes to the counter and returns with a token, all set to intervene and change the machinic order of things.

In other places like this one I have seen at the back something like a stage set, with stairs and a waterfall, a paneled and gilded ceiling, and a fountain shooting real water. Probably these ambitious scraps of decoration hold the metaphor I am searching for to understand the game being played. The hall was a cinema, but now the cinema has been divided into over a hundred cubicles, as if it were a computer-processed television image. Where darkness and silence used to allow for but a single lit surface and but a single source of sound, now there are a hundred surfaces and a hundred sounds. Still, nothing is safe from the future, and soon virtual reality will come sweep aside the video game screens, and only nostalgic rockers or revivalist artists will play in the few arcades that are not converted, like the old jukeboxes, into retropop decoration pieces.

Video game parlors cannot shake off an impression of seediness (a kind of "gambling den effect"). This is true even of the most upmarket, the ones that combine kitsch and the atmosphere of New York's East Side with tin staircases and beaten metal screens, or postmodern advertising signs with the fluorescent colors that were in use a decade ago. Or rather, the parlors put up with this impression as one of the by-products of their scenography. In the suburbs sometimes children are accompanied by their mothers, who look strangely out of place because they do not know what postures they should be adopting, or how to avoid the ricocheting light and sound. They have brought their children to a place that is unavoidable but dangerous, and they think their presence

may save their offspring from an addiction that they adjudge frightening precisely because it takes their children away from those real or imaginary places where they can be watched over. The children, controls in hand, are more skillful than their mothers are. They are also more intelligent: The mothers just get lost in the maze of images that is of no interest to them because they fail to understand it, or which they fail to understand for lack of interest. These mothers underline rather than weaken the parlor's seedy impression, because they are there like someone accompanying a drunk to a bar with the impossible aim of making him drink a few glasses less.

Much more than the game machinery, it is this impression of seediness or "gambling den effect" that marks the presence of a subculture whose members valorize achievements the rest of society does not consider to be achievements: for example, defeating the machine, which does not mean defeating a notional equal, but rather defeating something really different; or winning without obtaining anything other than symbolic reward. (When you beat the machines in a casino the rewards are, obviously, material. At some video arcades I have seen bets exchanged, but this is frankly exceptional.) There is, however, also something of the casino in this impression of seediness: Here every player is on his own to decide his own destiny in an individual combat with the machine, to demonstrate to the machine, rather than to the others in the arcade, his skill, fearlessness, cunning, daring, and speed. While it is true that many machines allow for two players to challenge each other, in public arcades the individual player confronting the machine is more common. As in a casino, there may be some observers following the progress of the most skillful or lucky players but, again as in a casino, good manners demand the principle of appropriate conduct: no looking on in a way that might cause the other people to feel as if they were being looked at and, vice versa, no gestures on the part of those who know they are being observed. The intrusive bystander and the braggart stand out badly in the video game landscape.

The impression of seediness also has to do with the general

absence of women. Some do come in following their boyfriends; others who come of their own accord are generally at the screens of games involving geometry, which emit fewer untoward sounds but pose more intellectual difficulties. The latest, three-dimensional, version of Tetris presents real challenges, demanding the ability to anticipate spatial configurations in three planes while you keep a fourth eye on the time to evaluate the speed at which the blocks fall. In any case, women are few and far between and no one looks at them. It is not because they are women that they are ignored, but rather because habit leads you to exchange the fewest possible looks across real spaces: Real spaces dull your sight and make you lose the sharpness and extreme close focus required to see screen space well. Obviously, there are more women at neighborhood arcades (which are more family oriented, smaller, and more restricted in what they offer technically) and at the very large videodromes in the city center—places that stave off the decadence of some once-traditional streets with their lavish decoration and with the presence of security guards, announced in some cases as one of the special services offered by the business's management. But coming across any of these guards immediately reinforces the effect of seediness.

The machines themselves are another thing altogether. Really they are an ensemble of elements belonging to distinct temporalities: The joysticks and control buttons belong to the mechanical age, while the screens belong to the era of digitalized images and sounds. The combination of these two technologies produces a hybrid even more incongruous than a cheap computer's well-designed keyboard. As a result, taking on these machines requires a combination of abilities of distinct types: manipulating the joystick and buttons is firmly part of the order of bodily reflexes; while events on-screen and the desires projected onto the screen pertain to an incorporeal logic. Many games exploit the difficulties produced by this heterogeneity. How much can I accelerate my bodily reflexes in the effort to beat the speed of the silicon chips? What level of difficulty can I take given not only my ability to foresee,

abstractly, what will happen next, but more important, my physical capacity to transform this foresight into actions that will appear on the screen? These are the crucial questions for every good video game player. Bad players (which is like saying bad drinkers: those who drink only to get drunk) do not try to answer these questions. Bad players can be detected immediately because they move the joystick like zombies, and press the buttons continuously, without subjecting themselves to the superquick logic of effects and consequences, without changing their tactics. They play out the game to its conclusion as though this conclusion were a question of unavoidable fate, a fate they could never defer temporally, never transform into the goal of a higher score. These bad players (the majority of the players I have seen) are overcome by the speed of the machine and believe that the speed of their physical reflexes will somehow be able to compensate for the fact that everything speeds up on the visual plane. They work against time. A good player, by contrast, works with time: He is only as fast as he need be, never faster than necessary. Bad players go against the logic of the game, which does not lie *only* in physical acceleration but which lies rather in a theory of the encounter (as in ballistics) between the acceleration of movement and the translation of reflexes into decisions that may make the endgame easier. I have very rarely seen good players, but there have now appeared, in the United States, how-to manuals. Players learn little if they submit to a video game as if it were but a television program with a little more interactivity.

There are machines that simulate a bad movie, whose controls imitate pistols or rifles. Though their technology may be more sophisticated, *conceptually* they are the video game's prehistory. The realism of the images these games produce is banal and unbelievable: banal because they translate the original iconic independence of video games' classic images into icons that imitate other icons; unbelievable because the laws of the video game could accept naturalistic realism only if it were perfect (as in virtual reality), not simply an awkward approximation to images that are older than the technology that makes them possible. Few fine players choose these machines whose rules, what is more, are too simple, and whose rough imitativeness offends an imagination, displayed by the better designed games, that is totally freed from any naturalistic referent. On the whole these machines (like those that feature football games in which actually existing teams confront each other) are found near the arcade's entrance, to attract those who are not true enthusiasts and who start to play because the machines remind them of something else, not because the machines give them something totally new.

There are also machines that simulate driving a car on a highway or racetrack. It has to be said that these are childish machines par excellence. Their didacticism means that with only minor programming changes, they could be incorporated into the school curriculum to teach children to drive with due respect for traffic signals, to accelerate appropriately on curves, avoiding any sports cars that try to overtake them all of a sudden. These machines multiply trivial omnipotence and are adaptable to the most predictable of desires. Their didacticism teaches nothing new; the emotion they produce has its origins in a hypertechnological variant of bumper cars. Players who do not understand either the abstraction of a geometrical video game or the stylized iconography invented by Nintendo play these games, which are closer to the imaginary of the market and to television adverts than they are to the videodrome aesthetic.

The classic machines (let us call classics those that, like Pacman, produce their own heroes) are the most original. They make evident the logic of variation and repetition that is the law of the game. They also underscore the fact that a video game's secret lies in a sharp distinction between cycles of activity and an evacuation of narrative meaning. Within each stage you win or lose without altering any overall story; progress consists in accumulating points or in preventing the multiplication of difficulties that arise as possible exits become blocked. There is no story or history; rather there are discrete stages at the end of which the player knows whether he has won or lost.

Classic video games refuse narration: Suspense depends upon the assessments made by player and machine after every change in the screen and every push of the buttons or movement of the joystick. Classic games have stylized characters and objects from the imaginary of cartoons, sports, or action films, but their truth lies more in the characters they invent. It is because of Pacman that there can be airplanes, flying saucers, prehistoric animals, and damsels in distress in other video games. Pacman and Tetris incarnate the ideal type of semiosis to which characters and objects that come from outside the world of the computer chip have had to adapt. Such characters adapt all the better the more they lose any traits belonging to graphic or narrative dimensions that historically preceded the video game. Yet the immediate future already tells us that these classic games will be edged out by the conjunction between films and games. It is when they are out of the picture that, precisely, their quality as classics will be recognized.

It has been said that video games constitute a "carnival of signifiers." This label indicates one attempt to understand the way in which even those games whose title or whose cast of characters promise to provide a story proceed to evacuate narration. In fact, whether or not the promise of narration is kept is unimportant to the player who does not start a game to see if it will reveal the outcome of an almost nonexistent fiction, but who plays rather with the aim that his or her duel with the machine will produce an outcome that is *not fictional.* The presence of signs that conjure up characters, oppositions, hierarchies, enemies, and helpers (as a grotesque structural-folk-televisual model would put it) proves only that you can have a cast of characters without having a story or history. Likewise, each stage of the game contains action without narration. Something about video games pushes them toward the tedium of infinite circularity, just like a Tom and Jerry cartoon's endless play of cat and mouse or Roadrunner's constant flight. There is no need to remember any previous stage in order to pass on to the next. Indeed, a player who stopped to remember would immediately be set back in the race the game

insists upon. What takes the place of a story, and the advertising material that comes with these games presents it as a sales pitch, is a *theme,* generally couched from the perspective of the player whom the material converts into the first person: You are an air force pilot who has to complete a mission by flying over unknown mountainous territory, and so on and so forth. There are also "intellectual" games, sold for use on home computers and to court the good conscience of their users who are invited to construct and develop their own plots, and are given time to consider alternatives.

We have, then, theme without narrative—that is, theme in a primitive state before anything has happened, before any detours or subplots. Hence: theme and signifiers. The medium contains a set of repetitions organized into cycles that demand a performance whose truth is not to be found in any confrontation between characters, but rather in the duel between player and machine. In this sense the classic video game produces a nonnarrative plot, composed of an encounter between physical actions and their digital consequences. Many films today imitate, without being able to achieve completely, this emptying out of history. In place of history, they offer the repetition of plot devices. Video games, like these films, split narrative from activity, character from narrative, extracting each from the assemblage that had traditionally brought them together.

If video games are a carnival of signifiers, then this is a carnival of activity without plot, that is specific to an epoch in which the experience of plot tends to disappear. Video games propose the illusion that actions may one day be able to modify the infinite recurrence that is inscribed into the machine and is presented to the potential player on the game's first screen, where his or her alternatives are endlessly repeated. As with televisual *zapping,* here, too, there is something of that combination of speed and erasure that could be the sign of an epoch.