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scenes from postmodern life

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Contents

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.