



*Seduction*

**JEAN BAUDRILLARD**

## **SEDUCTION**

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# **SEDUCTION**

**JEAN BAUDRILLARD**

translated by Brian Singer

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## CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION

#### I. THE ECLIPTIC OF SEX

The Ecliptic of Sex	3
The Eternal Irony of the Community	12
Stereo-Porno	28
Seduction/Production	37

#### II. SUPERFICIAL ABYSSES

The Sacred Horizon of Appearances	53
<i>Trompe l'oeil</i> or Enchanted Simulation	60
I'll Be Your Mirror	67
Death in Samarkand	72
The Secret and The Challenge	79
The Effigy of the Seductress	85
The Ironic Strategy of the Seducer	98
The Fear of Being Seduced	119

#### III. THE POLITICAL DESTINY OF SEDUCTION

The Passion for Rules	131
The Dual, the Polar and the Digital	154
The "Ludic" and Cold Seduction	157
Seduction as Destiny	179



## INTRODUCTION

A fixed destiny weighs on seduction. For religion seduction was a strategy of the devil, whether in the guise of witchcraft or love. It is always the seduction of evil – or of the world. It is the very artifice of the world. Its malediction has been unchanged in ethics and philosophy, and today it is maintained in psychoanalysis and the ‘liberation of desire.’ Given the present-day promotion of sex, evil and perversion, along with the celebration of the oftentimes programmatic resurrection of all that was once accursed, it might seem paradoxical that seduction has remained in the shadows – and even returned thereto permanently.

The eighteenth century still spoke of seduction. It was, with valour and honour, a central preoccupation of the aristocratic spheres. The bourgeois Revolution put an end to this preoccupation (and the others, the later revolutions ended it irrevocably – every revolution, in its beginnings, seeks to end the seduction of appearances). The bourgeois era dedicated itself to nature and production, things quite foreign and even expressly fatal to seduction. And since sexuality arises, as Foucault notes, from a process of production (of discourse, speech or desire), it is not at all surprising that seduction has been all the more covered over. We live today the promotion of nature, be it the good nature of the soul of yesteryear, or the good material nature of things, or even the psychic nature of desire. Nature pursues its realization through all the metamorphosis of the repressed, and through the liberation of all energies, be they

psychic, social or material.

Seduction, however, never belongs to the order of nature, but that of artifice – never to the order of energy, but that of signs and rituals. This is why all the great systems of production and interpretation have not ceased to exclude seduction – to its good fortune – from their conceptual field. For seduction continues to haunt them from without, and from deep within its forsaken state, threatening them with collapse. It awaits the destruction of every godly order, including those of production and desire. Seduction continues to appear to all orthodoxies as malefice and artifice, a black magic for the deviation of all truths, an exaltation of the malicious use of signs, a conspiracy of signs. Every discourse is threatened with this sudden reversibility, absorbed into its own signs without a trace of meaning. This is why all disciplines, which have as an axiom the coherence and finality of their discourse, must try to exorcize it. This is where seduction and femininity are confounded, indeed, confused. Masculinity has always been haunted by this sudden reversibility within the feminine. Seduction and femininity are ineluctable as the reverse side of sex, meaning and power.

Today the exorcism is more violent and systematic. We are entering the era of final solutions; for example, that of the sexual revolution, of the production and management of all liminal and subliminal pleasures, the micro-processing of desire, with the woman who produces herself as woman, and as sex, being the last avatar. Ending seduction.

Or else the triumph of a soft seduction, a white, diffuse feminization and eroticization of all relations in an enervated social universe.

Or else none of the above. For nothing can be greater than seduction itself, not even the order that destroys it.

I



THE ECLIPTIC OF SEX

Nothing is less certain today than sex, behind the liberation of its discourse. And nothing today is less certain than desire, behind the proliferation of its images.

In matters of sex, the proliferation is approaching total loss. Here lies the secret of the ever increasing production of sex and its signs, and the hyperrealism of sexual pleasure, particularly feminine pleasure. The principle of uncertainty has extended to sexual reason, as well as political and economic reason.

The state of sex's liberation is also that of its indetermination. No more want, no more prohibitions, and no more limits: it is the loss of every referential principle. Economic reason is sustained only by penury; it is put into question with the realization of its objective, the abolition of the spectre of penury. Desire too is sustained only by want. When desire is entirely on the side of demand, when it is operationalized without restrictions, it loses its imaginary and, therefore, its reality; it appears everywhere, but in generalized simulation. It is the ghost of desire that haunts the defunct reality of sex. Sex is everywhere, except in sexuality (Barthes).

In sexual mythology, the transition towards the feminine is contemporaneous with the passage from determination to general indetermination. The feminine is not substituted for the

masculine as one sex for another, according to some structural inversion. It is substituted as the end of the determinate representation of sex, as the flotation of the law that regulates the difference between the sexes. The ascent of the feminine corresponds to both the apogee of sexual pleasure and a catastrophe relative to sex's reality principle.

And so it is femininity that is gripping, in the present and fatal situation of sex's hyperreality – as it was yesterday, but in direct contrast, in irony and seduction.



Freud was right: there is but one sexuality, one libido – and it is masculine. Sexuality has a strong, discriminative structure centered on the phallus, castration, the Name-of-the Father, and repression. There is none other. There is no use dreaming of some non-phallic, unlocked, unmarked sexuality. There is no use seeking, from within this structure, to have the feminine pass through to the other side, or to cross terms. Either the structure remains the same, with the female being entirely absorbed by the male, or else it collapses, and there is no longer either female or male – the degree zero of the structure. This is very much what is happening today: erotic polyvalence, the infinite potentiality of desire, different connections, diffractions, libidinal intensities – all multiple variants of a liberatory alternative coming from the frontiers of a psychoanalysis free of Freud, or from the frontiers of desire free of psychoanalysis. Behind the effervescence of the paradigm of sex, everything is converging towards the non-differentiation of the structure and its potential neutralization.

The danger of the sexual revolution for the female is that she will be enclosed within a structure that condemns her to either discrimination when the structure is strong, or a derisory triumph within a weakened structure.

The feminine, however, is, and has always been, somewhere else. That is the secret of its strength. Just as it is said that something lasts because its existence is not adequate to its essence, it must be said that the feminine seduces because it is never where it thinks it is, or where it thinks itself. The feminine is not found in the history of suffering and oppression imputed

to it – women's historical tribulations (though by guile it conceals itself therein). It suffers such servitude only when assigned to and repressed within this structure – to which the sexual revolution assigns and represses it all the more dramatically. But by what aberrant complicity (complicit with what? if not, precisely, the male) would one have us believe that this is the female's history? Repression is already here in full force, in the narrative of women's sexual and political misery, to the exclusion of every other type of strength and sovereignty.

There is an alternative to sex and to power, one that psychoanalysis cannot know because its axiomatics are sexual. And yes, this alternative is undoubtedly of the order of the feminine, understood outside the opposition masculine/feminine, that opposition being essentially masculine, sexual in intention, and incapable of being overturned without ceasing to exist.

This strength of the feminine is that of seduction.



One may catch a glimpse of another, parallel universe (the two never meet) with the decline of psychoanalysis and sexuality as strong structures, and their cleansing within a *psy* and molecular universe (that of their final liberation). A universe that can no longer be interpreted in terms of psychic or psychological relations, nor those of repression and the unconscious, but must be interpreted in the terms of play, challenges, duels, the strategy of appearances – that is, the terms of seduction. A universe that can no longer be interpreted in terms of structures and diacritical oppositions, but implies a seductive reversibility – a universe where the feminine is not what opposes the masculine, but what seduces the masculine.

In seduction the feminine is neither a marked nor an unmarked term. It does not mask the “autonomy” of desire, pleasure or the body, or of a speech or writing that it has supposedly lost(?). Nor does it lay claim to some truth of its own. It seduces.

To be sure, one calls the sovereignty of seduction feminine by convention, the same convention that claims sexuality to be fundamentally masculine. But the important point is that this form of sovereignty has always existed – delineating, from a distance, the feminine as something that is nothing, that is never

"produced," is never where it is produced (and certainly cannot, therefore, be found in any "feminist" demand). And this not from the perspective of a psychic or biological bi-sexuality, but that of the trans-sexuality of seduction which the entire organization of sex tends to reject – as does psychoanalysis in accordance with the axiom that there is no other structure than that of sexuality (which renders it incapable, by definition, of speaking about anything else).



What does the women's movement oppose to the phallogocentric structure? Autonomy, difference, a specificity of desire and pleasure, a different relation to the female body, a speech, a writing – *but never seduction*. They are ashamed of seduction, as implying an artificial presentation of the body, or a life of vassalage and prostitution. They do not understand *that seduction represents mastery over the symbolic universe, while power represents only mastery of the real universe*. The sovereignty of seduction is incommensurable with the possession of political or sexual power.

There is a strange, fierce complicity between the feminist movement and the order of truth. For seduction is resisted and rejected as a misappropriation of women's true being, a truth that in the last instance is to be found inscribed in their bodies and desires. In one stroke the immense privilege of the feminine is effaced: the privilege of having never acceded to truth or meaning, and of having remained absolute master of the realm of appearances. The capacity immanent to seduction to deny things their truth and turn it into a game, the pure play of appearances, and thereby foil all systems of power and meaning with a mere turn of the hand. The ability to turn appearances in on themselves, to play on the body's appearances, rather than with the depths of desire. Now all appearances are reversible . . . only at the level of appearances are systems fragile and vulnerable . . . meaning is vulnerable only to enchantment. One must be incredibly blind to deny the sole force that is equal and superior to all others, since with a simple play of the *strategy of appearances*, it turns them upside down.



Anatomy is destiny, Freud said. One might be surprised that the feminist movement's rejection of this definition, phallic by definition, and sealed with the stamp of anatomy, opens onto an alternative that remains fundamentally biological and anatomical:

Indeed, woman's pleasure does not have to choose between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity, for example. The pleasure of the vaginal caress does not have to be substituted for that of the clitoral caress. They each contribute, irreplaceably, to woman's pleasure. Among other caresses . . . Fondling the breasts, touching the vulva, spreading the lips, stroking the posterior wall of the vagina, brushing against the mouth of the uterus, and so on. To evoke only a few of the most specifically female pleasures.

Luce Irigaray

*Parole de femme?* But it is always an anatomical speech, always that of the body. What is specific to women lies in the diffraction of the erogenous zones, in a decentered eroticism, the diffuse polyvalence of sexual pleasure and the transfiguration of the entire body by desire: this is the theme song that runs through the entire female, sexual revolution, but also through our entire culture of the body, from the Anagrammes of Bellmer to Deleuze's mechanized connections. It is always a question of the body, if not the anatomical, then the organic, erogenous body, the functional body that, even in fragmented and metaphorical form, would have pleasure as its object and desire as its natural manifestation. But then either the body is here only a metaphor (and if this is the case, what is the sexual revolution, and our entire culture, having become a body culture, talking about?), or else, with this body speech, this woman speech, we have, very definitely, entered into an anatomical destiny, into anatomy as destiny. There is nothing here radically opposed to Freud's maxim.

Nowhere is it a question of seduction, the body worked by artifice (and not by desire), the body seduced, the body to be

seduced, the body in its passion separated from its truth, from that ethical truth of desire which obsesses us – that serious, profoundly religious truth that the body today incarnates, and for which seduction is just as evil and deceitful as it once was for religion. Nowhere is it a question of the body delivered to appearances. Now, *seduction alone is radically opposed to anatomy as destiny*. Seduction alone breaks the distinctive sexualization of bodies and the inevitable phallic economy that results.

Any movement that believes it can subvert a system by its infra-structure is naive. Seduction is more intelligent, and seemingly spontaneously so. Immediately obvious – seduction need not be demonstrated, nor justified – it is there all at once, in the reversal of all the alleged depth of the real, of all psychology, anatomy, truth, or power. It knows (this is its secret) that *there is no anatomy*, nor psychology, that all signs are reversible. Nothing belongs to it, except appearances – all powers elude it, but it “reversibilizes” all their signs. How can one oppose seduction? The only thing truly at stake is mastery of the strategy of appearances, against the force of being and reality. There is no need to play being against being, or truth against truth; why become stuck undermining foundations, when a *light* manipulation of appearances will do.

Now woman is but appearance. And it is the feminine as appearance that thwarts masculine depth. Instead of rising up against such “insulting” counsel, women would do well to let themselves be seduced by its truth, for here lies the secret of their strength, which they are in the process of losing by erecting a contrary, feminine depth.



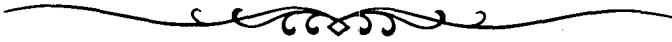
It is not quite the feminine as surface that is opposed to the masculine as depth, but the feminine as indistinctness of surface and depth. Or as indifference to the authentic and the artificial. Joan Rivière, in “Feminité sans mascarade” (*La Psychoanalyse* no. 7), makes a fundamental claim – one that contains within it all seduction: “Whether femininity be authentic or superficial, it is fundamentally the same thing.”

This can be said only of the feminine. The masculine, by contrast, possesses unfailing powers of discrimination and abso-

lute criteria for pronouncing the truth. The masculine is certain, the feminine is insoluble.

Now, surprisingly, this proposition, that in the feminine the very distinction between authenticity and artifice is without foundation, also defines the space of simulation. Here too one cannot distinguish between reality and its models, there being no other reality than that secreted by the simulative models, just as there is no other femininity than that of appearances. Simulation too is insoluble.

This strange coincidence points to the ambiguity of the feminine: it simultaneously provides radical evidence of simulation, and the only possibility of its overcoming – in seduction, precisely.



## THE ETERNAL IRONY OF THE COMMUNITY

*This femininity, the eternal irony  
of the community.*

Hegel

Femininity as a principle of uncertainty.

It causes the sexual poles to waver. It is not the pole opposed to masculinity, but what abolishes the differential opposition, and thus sexuality itself, as incarnated historically in the masculine phalocracy, as it might be incarnated in the future in a female phalocracy.

If femininity is a principle of uncertainty, it is where it is itself uncertain that this uncertainty will be greatest: in the play of femininity.

Transvestism. Neither homosexuals nor transexuals, transvestites like to play with the indistinctness of the sexes. The spell they cast, over themselves as well as others, is born of sexual vacillation and not, as is customary, the attraction of one sex for the other. They do not really like male men or female women, nor those who define themselves, redundantly, as distinct sexual beings. In order for sex to exist, signs must reduplicate biological being. Here the signs are separated from biology, and consequently the sexes no longer exist properly speaking. What

transvestites love is this game of signs, what excites them is *to seduce the signs themselves*. With them everything is makeup, theater, and seduction. They appear obsessed with games of sex, but they are obsessed, first of all, with play itself; and if their lives appear more sexually endowed than our own, it is because they make sex into a total, gestural, sensual, and ritual game, an exalted but ironic invocation.

Nico seemed so beautiful only because her femininity appeared so completely put on. She emanated something more than beauty, something more sublime, a different seduction. And there was deception: she was a false drag queen, a real woman, in fact, playing the queen. It is easier for a non-female/female than for a real woman, already legitimated by her sex, to move amongst the signs and take seduction to the limit. Only the non-female/female can exercise an untainted fascination, because s/he is more seductive than sexual. The fascination is lost when the real sex shows through; to be sure, some other desire may find something here, but precisely no longer in that perfection that belongs to artifice alone.

Seduction is always more singular and sublime than sex, and it commands the higher price.

One must not seek to ground transvestism in bisexuality. For the sexes and sexual dispositions, whether mixed or ambivalent, indefinite or inverted, are still real, and still bear witness to the psychic reality of sex. Here, however, it is this very definition of the sexual that is eclipsed. Not that this game is perverse. What is perverse is what perverts the order of the terms; but here there are no longer any terms to pervert, only signs to seduce.

Nor should one seek to ground transvestism in the unconscious or in "latent homosexuality." The old casuistry of latency is itself a product of the *sexual* imaginary of surfaces and depths, and always implies a diagnosis of symptoms and prognosis for their correction. *But here nothing is latent*, everything calls into question the very idea of a secret, determinate instance of sex, the idea that the deep play of phantasies controls the superficial play of signs. On the contrary, everything is played out in the vertigo of this inversion, this *transsubstantiation of sex into signs that is the secret of all seduction*.

Perhaps the transvestite's ability to seduce comes straight from parody – a parody of sex by its over-signification. The prostitution of transvestites would then have a different meaning from the more common prostitution of women. It would be closer to the sacred prostitution practiced by the Ancients (or the sacred status of the hermaphrodite). It would be contiguous with the theater, or with makeup, the ritual and burlesque ostentation of a sex whose own pleasure is absent.

The seduction itself is coupled with a parody in which an implacable hostility to the feminine shows through, and which might be interpreted as a male appropriation of the panoply of female allurements. The transvestite would then reproduce the situation of the first warrior – he alone was seductive – the woman being nul (consider fascism, and its affinity for transvestites). But rather than the addition of the sexes is not this their invalidation? And doesn't the masculine, in this mockery of femininity, rescind its status and prerogatives in order to become a contrapuntal element in a ritual game?

In any case, this parody of femininity is not quite as acerbic as one might think, since it is the parody of femininity *as men imagine* and stage it, as well as fantasize it. A femininity exaggerated, degraded, parodied (drag queens in Barcelona keep their moustaches and expose their hairy chests), the claim is that in this society femininity is naught but the signs with which men rig it up. To over-simulate femininity is to suggest that woman is but a masculine model of simulation. Here is a challenge to the female *model* by way of a female *game*, a challenge to the female/woman by way of the female/sign. And it is possible that this living, feigned denunciation, which plays on the furthest bounds of artifice, and simultaneously plays with the mechanisms of femininity to the point of perfection, is more lucid and radical than all the ideo-political claims of a femininity "alienated in its being." Here femininity is said to have no being (no nature, writing, singular pleasures or, as Freud said, particularized libido). Contrary to every search for an authentic femininity, for a woman's speech, etc., the claim here is that the female is nothing, and that this is her strength.

Here is a more subtle response than feminism's outright denial of the law of castration. For the latter encounters symbolic, not

anatomical fate, one that weighs on all possible sexuality. The overturning of this law, therefore, can only result from its *parodic resolution*, from the ex-centricity of the signs of femininity, the reduplication of signs that puts an end to every insoluble biology or metaphysics of the sexes. Makeup is nothing else: a triumphant parody, a solution by excess, the surface hypersimulation of this in-depth simulation that is itself the symbolic law of castration – a transsexual game of seduction.

The irony of artificial practices: the peculiar ability of the painted woman or prostitute to exaggerate her features, to turn them into more than a sign, and by this usage of, not the false as opposed to the true, but the more false than false, to incarnate the peaks of sexuality while simultaneously being absorbed in their simulation. The irony proper to the constitution of woman as idol or sex object: in her closed perfection, she puts an end to sex play and refers man, the lord and master of sexual *reality*, to his transparency as an *imaginary* subject. The ironic power of the object, then, which she loses when promoted to the status of a subject.

All masculine power is a power to produce. All that is produced, be it the production of woman as female, falls within the register of masculine power. The only, and irresistible, power of femininity is the inverse power of seduction. In itself it is nul, seduction has no power of its own, only that of annulling the power of production. But it always annuls the latter.

Has there, moreover, ever been a phallic power? This entire history of patriarchal domination, of phalocracy, the immemorial male privilege, is perhaps only a story. Beginning with the exchange of women in primitive societies, stupidly interpreted as the first stage of woman-as-object. All that we have been asked to believe – the universal discourse on the inequality of the sexes, the theme song of an egalitarian and revolutionary modernity (reinforced, these days, with all the energies of a *failed revolution*) – is perhaps one gigantic misunderstanding. The opposite hypothesis is just as plausible and, from a certain perspective, more interesting – that is, that the feminine has never been dominated, but has always been dominant. The feminine considered not as a sex, but as the form transversal to every sex, as well as to every power, as the secret, virulent form

of in-sexuality. The feminine as a challenge whose devastation can be experienced today throughout the entire expanse of sexuality. And hasn't this challenge, which is also that of seduction, always been triumphant?

In this sense, the masculine has always been but a residual, secondary and fragile formation, one that must be defended by retrenchments, institutions, and artifices. The phallic fortress offers all the signs of a fortress, that is to say, of weakness. It can defend itself only from the ramparts of a manifest sexuality, of a finality of sex that exhausts itself in reproduction, or in the orgasm.

One can hypothesize that the feminine is the only sex, and that the masculine only exists by a superhuman effort to leave it. A moment's distraction, and one falls back into the feminine. The feminine would have a decisive advantage, the masculine a definite handicap. One sees how ridiculous it is to want to "liberate" the one in order that it accede to the fragility of the other's "power," to the eccentric, paradoxical, paranoid and tiresome masculine state.

The phallic fable reversed: where woman is created from man by subtraction, here it is man created from woman by exception. A fable easily strengthened by Bettelheim's analysis in *Symbolic Wounds*, where men are said to have erected their powers and institutions in order to thwart the originally far superior powers of women. The driving force is not penis envy, but on the contrary, man's jealousy of woman's power of fertilization. This female advantage could not be atoned; a different order had to be built at all costs, a masculine social, political and economic order, wherein this advantage could be reduced. Thus the ritual practices whereby the signs of the opposite sex are appropriated are largely masculine: scarifications, mutilations, artificial vaginizations, couvades, etc.

All this is as convincing as a paradoxical hypothesis can be (and it is always more interesting than the received wisdom), but in the end it only reverses the terms, and so turns the feminine into an original substance, a sort of anthropological infrastructure. It reverses the anatomical determination, but lets it subsist as destiny – and once again the "irony of femininity" is lost.

The irony is lost when the feminine is instituted as a sex, even and above all when it is in order to denounce its oppression. It is the eternal illusion of enlightenment humanism, which aspires to liberate the servile sex, race or class in the very terms of its servitude. That the feminine becomes a sex in its own right! An absurdity, if posed in neither the terms of sex nor power.

The feminine knows neither equivalence nor value: it is, therefore, not soluble in power. It is not even subversive, it is reversible. Power, on the other hand, is soluble in the reversibility of the feminine. If the "facts" cannot decide whether it was the masculine or feminine that was dominant throughout the ages (once again, the thesis of women's oppression is based on a caricatural phallogocentric myth), by contrast, it remains clear that in matters of sexuality, the reversible form prevails over the linear form. The excluded form prevails, secretly, over the dominant form. The seductive form prevails over the productive form.

Femininity in this sense is on the same side as madness. It is because madness secretly prevails that it must be normalized (thanks to, amongst other things, the hypothesis of the unconscious). It is because femininity secretly prevails that it must be recycled and normalized (in sexual liberation in particular).



And in the orgasm.

The despoilment of the orgasm, the absence of sexual pleasure, is often advanced as characteristic of women's oppression. A flagrant injustice whose immediate rectification everyone must pursue in accord with the injunctions of a sort of long-distance race or sex rally. Sexual pleasure has become a requisite and a fundamental right. The most recent of the rights of man, it has acceded to the dignity of a categorical imperative. It is immoral to act otherwise. But this imperative does not even have the Kantian charm of endless finalities. As the management and self-management of desire, its imposition does not, no more than that of the law, allow ignorance as a defense.

But this is to remain unaware that sexual pleasure too is rever-

sible, that is to say that, in the absence or denial of the orgasm, superior intensity is possible. It is here, where the end of sex becomes aleatory again, that something arises that can be called seduction or delight. Or again, sexual pleasure can be just a pretext for another, more exciting, more passionate game. This is what occurred in *The Empire of the Senses*, where the aim was to push sexual pleasure to its limit and beyond – a challenge that prevails over the workings of desire, because it is much more dizzying, because it involves the passions while the other implies only a drive.

But this vertigo can be equally present in the *rejection* of sexual pleasure. Who knows if women, far from being “despoiled,” have not, from time immemorial, been playing a game of their own by triumphantly asserting a right to sexual reticence? If they have not, from the depths of their sexual impassibility, been throwing down a challenge, challenging men’s pleasure to be but the pleasure of men alone? No one knows to what destructive depths such provocation can go, nor what omnipotence it implies. Men, reduced to solitary pleasures, and enmeshed within the directives of delight and conquest, never did find a way out.

Who won this game with its different strategies? Men, apparently, all down the line. But it is by no means certain that they did not lose themselves in this terrain and become bogged down (as in that of the seizure of power) consequent to a sort of forward flight that could neither assure them of safety, nor relieve them of their secret despair at what had escaped them – whatever their gains or calculations. This had to end: it was imperative that women have orgasms. Measures had to be taken to liberate them and make them climax – thereby ending this unbearable challenge that ultimately nullifies sexual pleasure in a possible strategy of non-pleasure. For sexual pleasure knows no strategy: it is only energy seeking an outlet. It is therefore quite inferior to any strategy that uses it as its material, and uses desire itself as a tactical element. This is the central theme of the libertine sexuality of the eighteenth century, from Laclos to Casanova and Sade (including Kierkegaard in *Diary of the Seducer*), for whom sexuality still retains its ceremonial, ritual and strategic character, before sinking, with the Rights of Man and psychology, into the revealed truth of sex.



Here then is the era of the pill when sexual pleasure is decreed. The end of the right to sexual reticence. Women must realize that they are being dispossessed of something essential for them to put up so much resistance (all those ghosts of "missed" acts) to the "rational" adoption of the pill. The same resistance as that of entire generations to school, medicine, security and work. The same profound intuition about the ravages of an unfettered liberty, speech or pleasure. Defiance, the other's defiance, is no longer possible: all symbolic logic has been eliminated to the advantage of a permanent erection and its blackmail (without counting the tendentious lowering of the rate of sexual pleasure itself).

The "traditional" woman's sexuality was neither repressed nor forbidden. Within her role she was entirely herself; she was in no way defeated, nor passive, nor did she dream of her future "liberation." It is the beautiful souls who, retrospectively, see women as alienated from time immemorial, and then liberated. And there is a profound disdain in this vision, the same disdain as that shown towards the "alienated" masses supposedly incapable of being anything but mystified sheep.

It is easy to paint a picture of woman alienated through the ages, and then open the doors of desire for her under the auspices of the revolution and psychoanalysis. It is all so simple, so obscene in its simplicity – worse, it implies the very essence of sexism and racism: commiseration.

Fortunately, the female has never fit this image. She has always had her own strategy, the unremitting, winning strategy of challenge (one of whose major forms is seduction). There is no need to lament the wrongs she suffered, nor to want to rectify them. No need to play the lover of justice for the weaker sex. No need to mortgage everything for some liberation or desire whose secret had to wait till the twentieth century to be revealed. At each moment of the story the game was played with a full deck, with all the cards, including the trumps. And men did not win, not at all. On the contrary, it is women who are now about to lose, precisely under the sign of sexual pleas-

ure – but this is another story.



It is the story of the feminine in the present tense, in a culture that produces everything, makes everything speak, everything babble, everything climax. The promotion of the female as a sex in its own right (equal rights, equal pleasures), of the female as value – at the expense of the female as a principle of uncertainty. All sexual liberation lies in this strategy: the imposition of the rights, status and pleasure of women. The over-exposing and staging of the female as sex, and of the orgasm as the repeated proof of sex.

Pornography states this clearly. A trilogy of spread, sensualism and signification, pornography promotes female sexual pleasure in so exaggerated a manner, only in order to better bury the uncertainty that hovers over the "black continent." No more of that "eternal irony of the community" of which Hegel spoke. Henceforth women will climax, and will know why. All femininity will be made visible – woman as emblematic of orgasm, and orgasm as emblematic of sexuality. No more uncertainty, no more secrets. This is the radical obscenity that is beginning.



Pasolini's *Salo, or a 120 Days* – a veritable twilight of seduction. All reversibility has been abolished in accordance with an implacable logic. Everything is irreversibly masculine and dead. Even the complicity, the promiscuity between executioners and victims has disappeared: inanimate torture, perpetrated without emotion, a cold machination. (Here one perceives that sexual gratification is truly the industrial usufruct of the body, and the opposite of all seduction: it is a product of extraction, a technological product of a machinery of bodies, a logistics of pleasure which goes straight to its objective, only to find its object dead).

The film illustrates the truth that in a dominant masculine system, and in every dominant system (which thereby becomes

masculine), it is femininity that incarnates reversibility, the possibility of play and symbolic involvement. *Salo* is a universe completely sanitized of that minimum of seduction that provides the stakes not just of sex, but of every relation, including death and the exchange of death (this is expressed in *Salo*, as in Sade, by the predominance of sodomy). It is here that it becomes apparent that the feminine is not a sex (opposed to the other), but what counters the sex that alone has full rights and the full exercise of these rights, the sex that holds a monopoly on sex: the masculine, itself haunted by the fear of something other, *of which sex is but the disenchanted form*: seduction. The latter is a game, sex is a function. Seduction supposes a ritual order, sex and desire a natural order. It is these two fundamental forms that confront each other in the male and female, and not some biological difference or some naive rivalry of power.



The feminine is not just seduction; it also suggests a challenge to the male to be the sex, to monopolize sex and sexual pleasure, a challenge to go to the limits of its hegemony and exercise it unto death. Today phalocracy is collapsing under the pressure of this challenge (present throughout our culture's sexual history), and its inability to meet it. Our entire conception of sexuality may be collapsing because constructed around the phallic function and the positive definition of sex. Every *positive* form can accommodate itself to its negative form, but understands the challenge of the *reversible* form as mortal. Every structure can adapt to its subversion or inversion, but not to the reversion of its terms. Seduction is this reversible form.

Not the seduction to which women have been historically consigned: the culture of the gynaeceum, of rouge and lace, a seduction reworked by the mirror stage and the female imaginary, the terrain of sex games and ruses (though here lies the only bodily ritual of western culture left, all the others having disappeared, including politeness). But seduction as an ironic, alternative form, one that breaks the referentiality of sex and provides a space, not of desire, but of play and defiance.

This is what occurs in the most banal games of seduction: I shy away; it is not you who will give me pleasure, it is I who will make you play, and thereby rob you of your pleasure. A game in continuous movement – one cannot assume that sexual strategies alone are involved. There is, above all, a strategy of displacement (*se-ducere*: to take aside, to divert from one's path) that implies a distortion of sex's truth. To play is not to take pleasure. Seduction, as a passion and as a game at the level of the sign, acquires a certain sovereignty; it is seduction that prevails in the long term because it implies a reversible, indeterminate order.

The glamour of seduction is quite superior to the Christian consolation of the pleasures of the flesh. One wants us to consider the latter a natural finality -- and many are driven mad for failing to attain it. But love has nothing to do with sex drives, if not in the libidinal look of our contemporary culture. Love is a challenge and a prize: a challenge to the other to return the love. And to be seduced is to challenge the other to be seduced in turn (there is no finer argument than to accuse a woman of being incapable of being seduced). Perversion, from this perspective takes on a somewhat different meaning: it is *to pretend to be seduced* without being seduced, without being capable of being seduced.

The law of seduction takes the form of an uninterrupted ritual exchange where seducer and seduced constantly raise the stakes in a game that never ends. And cannot end since the dividing line that defines the victory of the one and the defeat of the other, is illegible. And because there is no limit to the challenge to love more than one is loved, or to be always more seduced – if not death. Sex, on the other hand, has a quick, banal end: the orgasm, the immediate form of desire's realization.

In analysis, one can see the extreme danger that may be incurred by a man who begins to listen to a woman's demand for sexual pleasure. If, through her desire, a woman alters the unalterability within which a man cannot help but enclose her, if she herself becomes an immediate and limitless demand, if she no longer remains within

this enclosure and is no longer held by it, the man finds himself cast into a subsuicidal state. A demand that tolerates no delay, no excuse, that is limitless with regard to intensity and duration, shatters the absolute represented by woman, by feminine sexuality, and even by feminine pleasure. ...Feminine sexual pleasure can always be rendered divine again, and thus controlled, reduced to the coolness of marble breasts, whereas the demand for enjoyment made by a woman to the man who is bound to her without being able to flee, causes him to lose his bearings and the feeling of pure contingency.... When all desire is channelled into the demand for enjoyment, the world turns upside down and bursts asunder. This is doubtless why our culture has taught women to demand nothing in order to induce them to desire nothing...<sup>1</sup>

And this "desire, all of which is channelled into the demand for enjoyment"? Does it still concern woman's "desire"? Isn't this a form of madness, which has but little to do with "liberation"? What is this new, feminine figure of unlimited sexual demand, an unlimited claim to sexual gratification? This, in effect, is the end point to which our culture is rushing – and Roustang is right, it conceals a form of subsuicidal collective violence. And not just for men, but for women too, and for sexuality in general.

We say no to those who love only women; those who love only men; those who love only children (there are also the elderly, sados, machos, dogs, cats)... The new militant, with his refined egocentrism, claims a right to his sexual racism. But we say no to all sectarianism. If one must become a misogynist to be a pederast, an androphobe to be

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1. François Roustang, *Dire Mastery* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1982), pp. 104-5.

a lesbian, ...if one must reject the pleasures of the night, chance encounters, and pick-ups in order to defend oneself against rape, then in the name of a struggle against certain prohibitions, one has returned to other taboos, moralisms, norms, blinkers...

Within our body we experience not one sex, not two, but a multitude of sexes. We do not see a man, or woman, but a human being, anthropomorphic(!)... Our bodies are tired of all the stereotyped cultural barriers, all the physiological segregation... We are male and female, adults and children, fairies, dykes, and gays, fuckers and fucked, buggers and buggered. We do not accept the reduction of all our sexual richness to a single sex. Our sapphism is only one facet of our sexuality. We refuse to limit ourselves to what society demands of us, that is, that we be either hetero, lesbian, gay the whole gamut of promotional products. We are unreasonable in all our desires.

Judith Belladonna Barbara Penton  
*Libé*, July 1978

The frenzy of unlimited sex, an exacerbated ventilation of desire onto demand and gratification – doesn't this constitute a reversal of what Roustag described: if until now women were taught to demand nothing in order that they desired nothing, are they not now being taught to demand everything in order to desire nothing? The entire black continent decoded by sexual gratification?

Masculinity would be closer to the Law, femininity closer to sexual pleasure. But is not such pleasure the axiomatics of a decoded sexual universe – the feminine and liberating reference produced by the gradual enfeeblement of the Law, the Law becoming an injunction to pleasure after having been its interdiction. An effect of simulation inverted: it is when pleasure seeks openly to be autonomous, that it is truly a product of the Law. Or else the Law collapses, and where the Law disappears, pleasure is inaugurated as a new contract. What does it

matter: nothing has changed, and the inversion of signs is but a consequence of strategy. This is the significance of the present turnaround, and of the twin privileging of the feminine and pleasure over the masculine and prohibition that once dominated sexual reason. The exaltation of the feminine is a perfect instrument for the unprecedented generalization and controlled extension of sexual Reason.

An unexpected fate, one that cuts short all the illusions of desire and all the rationalizations of liberation. Marcuse:

What within a patriarchal system appears as the feminine antithesis of masculine values would then truly constitute a repressed social and historical alternative – the socialist alternative... To do away with patriarchal society is to deny all the particular qualities attributed to women as women, and thus to extend these qualities to all sectors of social life, to work and leisure alike. Women's liberation would then be, simultaneously, the liberation of men...

*Actuels, Galilée*, p. 33.

Suppose the feminine liberated and placed at the service of a new collective Eros (the same *modus operandi* as for the death drive – the same dialectic aligned with the new social Eros). But what happens if the feminine, far from being a set of specific qualities (which it may have been when repressed, but only then), proves, once "liberated," to be the expression of an *erotic indetermination*, and of the loss of any specific qualities, as much in the social as the sexual sphere?

The situation of the feminine was quite ironic in seduction, and is just as ironic today in its indetermination and equivocation; for its promotion as subject is accompanied by its return as object, that is to say, as generalized pornography. A strange coincidence. Women's liberation would very much like to cast the deciding vote against this objectification. But the cause is hopeless, for the significance of the liberation of the feminine lies in its radical ambiguity. Even Roustang's text, which tends to support the flood of female demands, cannot but have a

presentiment of the catastrophe that the channelling of all desire into the demand for gratification constitutes. Unless one considers the subsuicidal state of men provoked by this demand as a decisive argument, there is nothing that lets one distinguish the *monstrosity* of this demand for female gratification from the monstrosity of its total interdiction in years past.

A similar ambiguity can be found in the male and his weakness. The panic men feel when faced with the “liberated” female subject is equalled only by their fragility before the pornographic chasm of the “alienated” female sex, the female sex object. Whether a woman demands sexual satisfaction “by becoming conscious of the rationality of her desire,” or offers herself in a state of total prostitution – whether the female be subject or object, liberated or prostituted, her sex is to be devouring, a gaping voracity. It is no accident that all pornography turns around the female sex. This is because erections are never certain (no scenes of impotence in pornography, they are averted by the hallucination of unrestrained feminine supply). In a sexuality made problematic by demands to prove and demonstrate itself without discontinuity, the marked position, the masculine position, will be fragile. By contrast, the female sex remains equal to itself in its availability, in its chasm, its degree zero. The continuity of female sexuality, as opposed to male intermittency, is enough to ensure its superiority at the level of the organic representation of sexual pleasure, the representation of endless sex that has come to dominate our fantasies.

Sexual liberation, like that of the productive forces, is potentially limitless. It demands a profusion come true, a “sexually affluent society.” It can no more tolerate a scarcity of sexual goods, than of material goods. Now, this *utopian* continuity and availability can only be incarnated by the female sex. This is why in this society everything – objects, goods, services, relations of all types – will be feminized, sexualized in a feminine fashion. In advertising it is not so much a matter of adding sex to washing machines (which is absurd) as conferring on objects the imaginary, female quality of being available at will, of never being retractile or aleatory.

In pornography sexuality is lulled by this yawning monoto-

ny, where flaccid or erectile men play only a nominal role. Hard core has changed nothing: the male is no longer interesting because too determined, too marked – the phallus as canonical signifier – and thus too fragile. Fascination moves towards the neuter, towards an indeterminate chasm, a mobile, diffuse sexuality. The feminine's historical revenge after so many centuries of repression and frigidity? Perhaps, but more likely, the exhaustion of sexuality, whether it be the masculine sexuality that once nourished all the schemes of erectility, verticality, ascendancy, growth, production, etc., and is at present lost in the obsessive simulation of all these themes – or a feminine sexuality, as incarnated from time immemorial in seduction. Today, behind the mechanical objectification of the signs of sex, it is the masculine as fragile, and the feminine as degree zero which have the upper hand.

We are indeed in an original situation as regards sexual violence – violence done to the “subsuicidal” male by unbridled, female sensualism. But it is not a matter of a reversal of the historical violence done to women by male sexual force. The violence involved here is relative to the neutralization, depression and collapse of the marked term before the irruption of the non-marked term. It is not a real, generic violence, but a violence of dissuasion, *the violence of the neuter*, the violence of the degree zero.

So too is pornography: the violence of sex neutralized.



## STEREO-PORNO

*Take me to your room and fuck  
me. There is something indefinable in  
your vocabulary, something left to be  
desired.*

Philip Dick  
*The Schizos' Ball*

*Turning everything into reality*  
Jimmy Cliff

The *trompe l'oeil* removes a dimension from real space, and this accounts for its seduction. Pornography by contrast adds a dimension to the space of sex, it makes the latter more real than the real – and this accounts for its absence of seduction.

There is no need to search for the phantasies that haunt pornography (fetishisms, perversions, primal scenes, etc.), for they are barred by an excess of “reality.” Perhaps pornography is only an allegory, that is to say, a forcing of signs, a baroque enterprise of over-signification touching on the “grotesque” (literally, “grotesque” garden art added to a rocky nature as pornography adds the vividness of anatomical detail).

The obscenity itself burns and consumes its object. One sees from up close what one has never seen before; to one's good fortune, one has never seen one's genitals function from so close, nor for that matter, from so general a perspective. It is all too

true, too near to be true. And it is this that is fascinating, this excess of reality, this hyperreality of things. The only phantasy in pornography, if there is one, is thus not a phantasy of sex, but of the real, and its absorption into something other than the real, the hyperreal. Pornographic voyeurism is not a sexual voyeurism, but a voyeurism of representation and its perdition, a dizziness born of the loss of the scene and the irruption of the obscene.

Consequent to the anatomical zoom, the dimension of the real is abolished, the distance implied by the gaze gives way to an instantaneous, exacerbated representation, that of sex in its pure state, stripped not just of all seduction, but of its image's very potentiality. Sex so close that it merges with its own representation: the end of perspectival space, and therefore, that of the imaginary and of phantasy – end of the scene, end of an illusion.

Obscenity, however, is not pornography. Traditional obscenity still contains an element of transgression, provocation, or perversion. It plays on repression, with fantasies of violence. With sexual liberation this obscenity disappears: Marcuse's "repressive desublimation" goes this route (and even if it has not passed into general mores, the mythical triumph of release today, like that of repression yesterday, is total). The new obscenity, like the new philosophy (*la nouvelle philosophie*) arises on the burying grounds of the old, and has another meaning. It does not play with violent sex, sex with real stakes, but with sex neutralized by tolerance. Sex here is outrageously "rendered," but it is the rendering of something that has been removed. Pornography is its artificial synthesis, its ceremony but not its celebration. Something *neo* or *retro*, like those green spaces that substitute their chlorophyl effects for a defunct nature, and for this reason, partake of the same obscenity as pornography.

Modern unreality no longer implies the imaginary, it engages more reference, more truth, more exactitude – it consists in having everything pass into the absolute evidence of the real. As in hyperrealist paintings (the paintings of the "magic realists") where one can discern the grain of the face's skin, an unwonted microscopics that lacks even the charm of the uncanny. Hyperrealism is not surrealism, it is a vision that hunts down

seduction by means of visibility. One "gives you more." This is already true of colour in film or television. One gives you so much – colour, lustre, sex, all in high fidelity, and with all the accents (that's life!) – that you have nothing to add, that is to say, nothing to give in exchange. Absolute repression: by giving you *a little too much* one takes away everything. Beware of what has been so well "rendered," when it is being returned to you without you ever having given it!

A bewildering, claustrophobic and obscene image, that of Japanese quadraphonics: an ideally conditioned room, fantastic technique, music in four dimensions, not just the three of the environing space, but a fourth, visceral dimension of internal space. The technical delirium of the perfect restitution of music (Bach, Monteverdi, Mozart!) *that has never existed*, that no one has ever heard, and that was not meant to be heard like this. Moreover, one does not "hear" it, for the distance that allows one to *bear* music, at a concert or somewhere else, is abolished. Instead it permeates one from all sides; there is no longer any musical space; it is the simulation of a total environment that dispossesses one of even the minimal analytic perception constitutive of music's *charm*. The Japanese have simple-mindedly, and in complete good faith, confused the real with the greatest number of dimensions possible. If they could construct hexaphonics, they would do it. Now, it is by this fourth dimension which they have added to music, that they castrate you of all *musical* pleasure. Something else fascinates (but no longer seduces) you: technical perfection, "high fidelity," which is just as obsessive and puritanical as the other, conjugal fidelity. This time, however, one no longer even knows what object it is faithful to, for no one knows where the real begins or ends, nor understands, therefore, the fever of perfectibility that persists in the real's reproduction.

Technique in this sense digs its own grave. For at the same time that it perfects the means of synthesis, it deepens the criteria of analysis and definition to such an extent that total faithfulness, exhaustiveness as regards the real becomes forever impossible. The real becomes a vertiginous phantasy of exactitude lost in the infinitesimal.

In comparison with, for example, the *trompe-l'oeil*, which

saves on one dimension, "normal" three-dimensional space is already debased and impoverished *by virtue of an excess of means* (all that is real, or wants to be real, constitutes a debasement of this type). Quadrophonics, hyperstereo, or hifi constitute a conclusive debasement.

Pornography is the quadrophonics of sex. It adds a third and fourth track to the sexual act. It is the hallucination of detail that rules. Science has already habituated us to this microscopics, this excess of the real in its microscopic detail, this voyeurism of exactitude – a close-up of the invisible structures of the cell – to this notion of an inexorable truth that can no longer be measured with reference to the play of appearances, and that can only be revealed by a sophisticated technical apparatus. End of the secret.

What else does pornography do, in its sham vision, than reveal the inexorable, microscopic truth of sex? It is directly descended from a metaphysics that supposes the phantasy of a hidden truth and its revelation, the phantasy of "repressed" energy and its *production* – on the obscene scene of the real. Thus the impasse of enlightened thought when asked, should one censure pornography and choose a well-tempered repression? There can be no definitive response in the affirmative, for pornography has reason on its side; it is part of the devastation of the real, of the insane illusion of the real and its objective "liberation." One cannot liberate the productive forces without wanting to "liberate" sex in its brute function; they are both equally obscene. The realist corruption of sex, the productivist corruption of labour – same symptoms, same combat.

The equivalent of the conveyor belt here, is the Japanese vaginal cyclorama – it outdoes any strip-tease. Prostitutes, their thighs open, sitting on the edge of a platform, Japanese workers in their shirt-sleeves (it is a popular spectacle), permitted to shove their noses up to their eyeballs within the woman's vagina in order to see, to see better – but what? They clamber over each other in order to gain access, and all the while the prostitutes speak to them gently, or rebuke them sharply for the sake of form. The rest of the spectacle, the flagellations, the reciprocal masturbation and traditional strip-tease, pales before this moment of absolute obscenity, this moment of visual voracity that

goes far beyond sexual possession. A sublime pornography: if they could do it, these guys would be swallowed up whole within the prostitute. An exaltation with death? Perhaps, but at the same time they are comparing and commenting on the respective vaginas in mortal seriousness, without ever smiling or breaking out in laughter, and without ever trying to touch – except when playing by the rules. No lewdness, but an extremely serious, infantile act borne of an undivided fascination with the mirror of the female organ, like Narcissus' fascination with his own image. Beyond the conventional idealism of the strip-tease (perhaps there might even be some seduction here), pornography at its most sublime reverses itself into a purified obscenity, an obscenity that is purer, deeper, more visceral. But why stop with nudity, or the genitalia? If the obscene is a matter of representation and not of sex, it must explore the very interior of the body and the viscera. Who knows what profound pleasure is to be found in the visual dismemberment of mucous membranes and smooth muscles? Our pornography still retains a restricted definition. Obscenity has an unlimited future.

But take heed, it is not a matter of the deepening of a drive; what is involved is an *orgy of realism*, an orgy of *production*. A rage (perhaps also a drive, but one that substitutes itself for all the others) to summon everything before the jurisdiction of signs. Let everything be rendered in the light of the sign, in the light of a visible energy. Let all speech be liberated and proclaim desire. We are reveling in this liberalization, which, in fact, simply marks the growing progress of obscenity. All that is hidden and still enjoys a forbidden status, will be unearthed, rendered to speech and made to bow before the facts. The real is growing ever larger, some day the entire universe will be real, and when the real is universal, there will be death.



Pornographic simulation: nudity is never anything but an extra sign. Nudity veiled by clothing functions as a secret, ambivalent referent. Unveiled, it surfaces as a sign and returns to the circulation of signs: nudity de-sign. The same occurs with hard core and blue porn: the sexual organ, whether erect or

open wide is just another sign in the hypersexual panoply. Phallus-design. The more one advances willy-nilly in sex's veracity, in the exposure of its workings, the more immersed one becomes in the accumulation of signs, and the more enclosed one becomes in the endless over-signification of a real that no longer exists, and of a body that never existed. Our entire body culture, with its concern for the "expression" of the body's "desires," for the stereophonics of desire, is a culture of irredeemable monstrosity and obscenity.

Hegel: "Just as when speaking of the exteriority of the human body, we said that its entire surface, in contrast to that of the animal world, reveals the presence and pulsation of the heart, we say of art that it has as its task to create in such a way that at all points of its surface the phenomenal, the appearance becomes an eye, the seat of the soul, rendering itself visible to the spirit." There is, therefore, never any nudity, never any nude body that is simply nude; there is never just a body. It is like the Indian said when the white man asked him why he ran around naked: "For me, it is all face." In a non-fetishistic culture (one that does not fetishize nudity as objective truth) the body is not, as in our own, opposed to the face, conceived as alone rich in expression and endowed with "eyes": it is itself a face, and looks at you. It is therefore not obscene, that is to say, made to be seen nude. It *cannot* be seen nude, no more than the face can for us, for the body is – and is only – a symbolic veil; and it is by way of this play of veils, which, literally, abolishes the body "as such," that seduction occurs. This is where seduction is at play and not in the tearing away of the veil in the name of some manifestation of truth or desire.

The indistinction of face and body in a total culture of appearances – the distinction between face and body in a culture of meaning (the body here becomes monstrously *visible*, it becomes the sign of a monster called desire) – then the total triumph in pornography of the obscene body, to the point where the face is effaced. The erotic models are faceless, the actors are neither beautiful, ugly, or expressive; functional nudity effaces everything in the "spectacularity" of sex. Certain films are no more than visceral sound-effects of a coital close-up; even the body disappears, dispersed amongst oversize, par-

tial objects. Whatever the face, it remains inappropriate, for it breaks the obscenity and reintroduces meaning where everything aspires to abolish it in sexual excess and a nihilistic vertigo.

At the end of this terrorist debasement, where the body (and its "desire") are made to yield to the evidence, appearances no longer have any secret. A culture of the desublimation of appearances: everything is materialized in accord with the most objective categories. A pornographic culture *par excellence*; one that pursues the workings of the real at all times and in all places. A pornographic culture with its ideology of the concrete, of facticity and use, and its concern with the preeminence of use value, the material infrastructure of things, and the body as the material infrastructure of desire. A one-dimensional culture that exalts everything in the "concreteness of production" or of pleasure – unlimited mechanical labour or copulation. What is obscene about this world is that nothing is left to appearances, or to chance. Everything is a visible, necessary sign. Like those dolls, adorned with genitalia, that talk, pee, and will one day make love. And the little girl's reaction: "My little sister, she knows how to do that too. Can't you give me a real one?"



From the discourse of labour to the discourse of sex, from the discourse of productive forces to that of drives, one finds the same ultimatum, that of *pro-duction* in the literal sense of the term. Its original meaning, in fact, was not to fabricate, but to render visible or make appear. Sex is produced like one produces a document, or as one says of an actor that he performs (*se produit*) on stage.

To produce is to materialize by force what belongs to another order, that of the secret and of seduction. Seduction is, at all times and in all places, opposed to production. Seduction removes something from the order of the visible, while production constructs everything in full view, be it an object, a number or concept.

Everything is to be produced, everything is to be legible, everything is to become real, visible, accountable; everything is to be transcribed in relations of force, systems of concepts

or measurable energy; everything is to be said, accumulated, indexed and recorded. This is sex as it exists in pornography, but more generally, this is the enterprise of our entire culture, whose natural condition is obscene: a culture of monstration, of demonstration, of productive monstrosity.

No seduction here, nor in pornography, given the abrupt production of sexual acts, and the ferocity of pleasure in its immediacy. There is nothing seductive about bodies traversed by a gaze literally sucked in by a vacuum of transparency; nor can there be even a hint of seduction within the universe of production, where a principle of transparency governs the forces belonging to the world of visible, calculable phenomena – objects, machines, sexual acts, or the gross national product.



The insoluble equivocalness of pornography: it puts an end to all seduction *via sex*, but at the same time it puts an end to *sex* via the accumulation of the signs of sex. Both triumphant parody and simulated agony – there lies its ambiguity. In a sense, pornography is true: it owes its truth to a system of sexual dissuasion by hallucination, dissuasion of the real by the hyper-real, and of the body by its forced materialization.

Pornography is usually faulted for two reasons – for manipulating sex in order to defuse the class struggle (always the old “mystified consciousness”) and for corrupting sex (the good, true sex, the sex to be liberated, the sex to be considered amongst our natural rights) by its commodification. Pornography, then, is said to mask either the truth of capital and the infrastructure, or that of sex and desire. But in fact pornography does not mask anything (yes, that is indeed the case). It is not an ideology, i.e., it does not hide some truth; it is a simulacrum, i.e., it is a truth effect that hides the truth’s non-existence.

Pornography says: there must be good sex somewhere, for I am its caricature. In its grotesque obscenity, it attempts to save sex’s truth and provide the faltering sexual model with some credibility. Now, the whole question is whether good sex exists, or whether, quite simply, sex exists, somewhere – sex as

the body's ideal use value, sex as possible pleasures which can and must be "liberated." It is the same question demanded of political economy: is there "good" value, an ideal use value beyond exchange value understood as the inhuman abstraction of capital – an ideal value of goods or social relations which can and must be "liberated"?



## SEDUCTION/PRODUCTION

In reality, pornography is but the paradoxical limit of the sexual. A “realistic” exacerbation, a maniacal obsession with the real: this is the obscene, in the etymological and every other sense. But is not the sexual itself already a forced materialization? Is not the advent of sexuality already part of occidental realistics, the compulsion proper to our culture to instantiate and instrumentalize everything?

It is absurd, when speaking of other cultures, to dissociate religion, economics, politics, and the legal system (i.e., the social and other classificatory phantasmagorias) for the reason that such a dissociation has not occurred, these concepts being like so many diseases with which we infect these cultures in order to better “understand” them. In the same manner, it is absurd to autonomize the sexual as a separate instance, an irreducible given, as something to which other instances or givens can be reduced. We need a critique of sexual Reason, or rather, a genealogy of sexual Reason similar to Nietzsche’s genealogy of good and evil, for it is our new morality. One might say of sexuality, as of death: “it is a new wrinkle to which consciousness became accustomed not so long ago.”

We remain perplexed and vaguely compassionate when confronted with cultures for which the sexual act is not a finality

in itself, for which sexuality does not have the mortal seriousness of an energy to be liberated, of an ejaculation to be forced, a production at any price, or hygienic auditing of the body. Cultures that preserve lengthy procedures of enticement and sensuality, long series of gifts and counter-gifts, with sex being but one service amongst others, and the act of love one possible end-term to a prescribed, ritualistic interchange. Such proceedings no longer make sense to us; sex has become, strictly speaking, *the actualization of desire in pleasure* – all else is literature. An extraordinary crystallization around the orgasmic, and more generally, the energizing function.

Ours is a culture of premature ejaculation. Increasingly all seduction, all manner of enticement – which is always a highly *ritualized* process – is effaced behind a *naturalized* sexual imperative, behind the immediate and imperative realization of desire. Our center of gravity has been displaced towards a libidinal economy concerned with only the naturalization of desire, a desire dedicated to drives, or to a machine-like functioning, but above all, to the imaginary of repression and liberation.

Henceforth one no longer says: "You have a soul and it must be saved," but:

"You have a sex, and you must put it to good use."

"You have an unconscious, and you must let the id speak."

"You have a body, and you must derive pleasure from it."

"You have a libido, and you must expend it," etc.

This pressure towards liquidity, flux and the accelerated articulation of the sexual, psychic and physical body is an exact replica of that which regulates exchange value: capital must circulate, there must no longer be any fixed point, investments must be ceaselessly renewed, value must radiate without respite – this is the form of value's present realization, and sexuality, the sexual *model*, is simply its mode of appearance at the level of the body.

As a model sex takes the form of an *individual* enterprise based on natural energy: to each his desire and may the best man prevail (in matters of pleasure). It is the selfsame form as

capital, and this is why sexuality, desire and pleasure are *subaltern* values. When they first appeared, not so long ago, as a system of reference on the horizon of western culture, it was as fallen, residual values – the ideal of inferior classes, the bourgeoisie, then the petty-bourgeoisie – relative to the aristocratic values of birth and blood, valour and seduction, or the collective values of religion and sacrifice.

Moreover, the body – this selfsame body to which we ceaselessly refer – has no other reality than that implied by the sexual and productive model. It is capital that, in a single movement, gives rise to both the energizing body of labour power, and the body of our dreams, a sanctuary of desires and drives, of psychic energy and the unconscious, the impulsive body that haunts the primary processes – the body itself having become a primary process, and thereby an anti-body, an ultimate revolutionary referent. The two bodies are simultaneously engendered in repression, and their apparent antagonism is but a consequence of their reduplication. When one uncovers in the body's secret places an "unbound" libidinal energy opposed to the "bound" energy of the productive body, when one uncovers in desire the truth of the body's phantasms and drives, one is still only disintering the psychic metaphor of capital.

Here is your desire, your unconscious: a psychic metaphor of capital in the rubbish heap of political economy. And the sexual jurisdiction is but a fantastic extension of the commonplace ideal of private property, where everyone is assigned a certain amount of capital to manage: a psychic capital, a libidinal, sexual or unconscious capital, for which each person will have to answer individually, under the sign of his or her own liberation.

A fantastic reduction of seduction. This sexuality transformed by the revolution of desire, this mode of bodily production and circulation has acquired its present character, has come to be spoken of in terms of "sexual relations," only by forgetting all forms of seduction – just as one can speak of the social in terms of "relations" or "social relations," only after it has lost all symbolic substance.

Wherever sex has been erected into a function, an autono-

mous instance, it has liquidated seduction. Sex today generally occurs only in the place, and in place of a missing seduction, or as the residue and staging of a failed seduction. *It is then the absent form of seduction that is hallucinated sexually – in the form of desire.* The modern theory of desire draws its force from seduction's liquidation.

Henceforth, in place of a seductive form, there is a productive form, an "economy" of sex: the retrospective of a drive, the hallucination of a stock of sexual energy, of an unconscious in which the repression of desire and its clearance are inscribed. All this (and the psychic in general) results from the autonomization of sex – as nature and the economy were once the precipitate of the autonomization of production. Nature and desire, both of them idealized, succeed each other in the progressive designs for liberation, yesterday the liberation of the productive forces, today that of the body and sex.

One can speak of the birth of the sexual and of sex speech – just as one speaks of the birth of the clinic and clinical gaze – *where once there was nothing*, if not uncontrolled, unstable, insensate, or else highly ritualized forms. Where too, it follows, there was no repression, this thematic with which we have burdened all previous societies even more than our own. We condemn them as primitive from a technological perspective, but also from a sexual or psychic perspective, for they conceived of neither the sexual nor the unconscious. Fortunately, psychoanalysis has come along to lift the burden and reveal what was hidden. The incredible racism of the truth, the evangelical racism of the Word and its accession.

Where the sexual does not appear of and for itself, we act as though it were repressed; it is our way of saving it. And yet to speak of repressed or sublimated sexuality in primitive, feudal or other societies, or simply to speak of "sexuality" and the unconscious in such cases, is a sign of profound stupidity. It is not even certain that such talk holds the best key to unlocking our society. On this basis, that is, by calling into question the very hypothesis of sexuality, by questioning sex and desire as autonomous instances, it is possible to agree with Foucault and say (though not for the same reasons) that in our culture too there is no and *never has been any repression either*.

Sexuality as a discourse is, like political economy (and every other discursive system), only a montage or simulacrum which has always been traversed, thwarted and exceeded by actual practice. The coherence and transparency of *homo sexualis* has no more existence than the coherence and transparency of *homo economicus*.

It is a long process that simultaneously establishes the psychic and the sexual, that establishes the "other scene," that of the phantasy and the unconscious, at the same time as the energy produced therein – a psychic energy that is merely a direct consequence of the staged hallucination of repression, an energy hallucinated as sexual substance, which is then metaphorized and metonymized according to the various instances (topical, economic, etc.), and according to all the modalities of secondary and tertiary repression. Psychoanalysis, this most admirable edifice, the most beautiful hallucination of the back-world, as Nietzsche would say. The extraordinary effectiveness of this model for the simulation of scenes and energies – an extraordinary theoretical psychodrama, this staging of the psyche, this scenario of sex as a separate instance and insurmountable reality (akin to the hypostatization of production). What does it matter if the economic, the biological or the psychic bear the costs of this staging – of what concern is the "scene" or "the other scene": it is the entire scenario of sexuality (and psychoanalysis) as a model of simulation that should be questioned.



It is true that in our culture the sexual has triumphed over seduction, and annexed it as a subaltern form. Our instrumental vision has inverted everything. For in the symbolic order seduction is primary, and sex appears only as an addendum. Sex in this latter order is like the recovery in an analytic cure, or a birth in a story of Levi-Strauss; it comes as an extra, without a relation of cause to effect. This is the secret of "symbolic efficacy": the world's workings are the result of a mental seduction. Thus the butcher Tchouang-Tseu whose understanding enabled him to describe the cow's interstitial structure without ever having used the blade of a knife: a sort of symbolic reso-

lution that, as an addendum, has a practical result.

Seduction too works on the mode of symbolic articulation, of a duel\* affinity with the structure of the other – sex may result, as an addendum, but not necessarily. More generally, seduction is a challenge to the very existence of the sexual order. And if our “liberation” seems to have reversed the terms and successfully challenged the order of seduction, it is by no means certain that its victory is not hollow. The question of the ultimate superiority of the ritual logics of challenge and seduction over the economic logics of sex and production still remains unresolved.

For revolutions and liberations are fragile, while seduction is inescapable. It is seduction that lies in wait for them – seduced as they are, despite everything, by the immense setbacks that turn them from their truth – and again it is seduction that awaits them even in their triumph. The sexual discourse itself is continually threatened with saying something other than what it says.

In an American film a guy pursues a street-walker, prudently, according to form. The woman responds, aggressively: “What do you want? Do you want to jump me? Then, change your approach! Say, I want to jump you!” and the guy, troubled, replies: “yes, I want to jump you.” “Then go fuck yourself!” And later, when he is driving her in his car: “I’ll make coffee, and then you can jump me.” In fact, this cynical conversation, which appears objective, functional, anatomical, and without nuance, is only a game. Play, challenge, and provocation are just beneath the surface. Its very brutality is rich with the inflections of love and complicity. It is a new manner of seduction.

Or this conversation taken from *The Schizophrenics' Ball* by Philip Dick:

“Take me to your room and fuck me.”

“There is something indefinable in your vocabulary, something left to be desired.”

One can understand this as: Your proposition is unacceptable, it lacks the poetry of desire, it is too direct. But in a sense the text says the exact opposite: that the proposition has some-

\*Trans. note: In French, the word *duel* means both duel/dual. Baudrillard is clearly playing on the double meaning of the word – agonial relations and reciprocal challenges. I translate the term ‘duel’, even in its adjectival form.

thing “indefinable” about it, which thereby *opens* the path to desire. A direct sexual invitation is too direct to be true, and immediately refers to something else.

The first version deplores the obscenity of the conversation. The second is more subtle; it is capable of disclosing a twist to obscenity – obscenity as an enticement, and thus as an “indefinable” allusion to desire. An obscenity too brutal to be true, and too impolite to be dishonest – obscenity as a challenge and therefore, again, as seduction.

In the last instance, a purely sexual statement, a pure demand for sex, is impossible. One cannot be free of seduction, and the discourse of anti-seduction is but its last metamorphosis.

It is not just that a pure discourse of sexual demand is absurd given the complexity of affective relations; it quite simply does not exist. To believe in sex’s reality and in the possibility of speaking sex without mediation is a delusion – the delusion of every discourse that believes in transparency; it is also that of functional, scientific, and all other discourses with claims to the truth. Fortunately, the latter is continually undermined, dissipated, destroyed, or rather, circumvented, diverted, and *seduced*. Surreptitiously they are turned against themselves; surreptitiously they dissolve into a different game, a different set of stakes.

To be sure, neither pornography nor sexual transactions exercise any seduction. Like nudity, and like the truth, they are abject. They are the body’s disenchanted form, just as sex is the suppressed and disenchanted form of seduction, just as use value is the disenchanted form of the object, and just as, more generally, the real is the suppressed and disenchanted form of the world.

Nudity will never abolish seduction, for it immediately becomes something else, the hysterical enticements of a different game, one that goes beyond it. There is no degree zero, no objective reference, no point of neutrality, but always and again, stakes. Today all our signs appear to be converging – like the body in nudity and meaning in truth – towards some conclusive objectivity, an entropic and metastable form of the neutral. (What else is the ideal-typical, vacationing nude body, given over to the sun, itself hygenic and neutralized, with its luciferi-

an parody of burning). But is there ever a cessation of signs at some zero point of the real or the neutral? Isn't there always a reversion of the neutral itself into a new spiral of stakes, seduction and death.

What seduction used to lie concealed in sex? What new seduction, what new challenge lies concealed in the abolition of what, within sex, was once at stake? (The same question on another plane: What challenge, what source of fascination, lies concealed in the masses, in the abolition of what was once at stake with the social?)

All descriptions of disenchanted systems, all hypotheses about the disenchantment of systems – the flood of simulation and dissuasion, the abolition of symbolic processes, the death of referentials – are perhaps false. The neutral is never neutral; it becomes an object of fascination. But does it then become an object of seduction?



Agonistic logics, logics of ritual and seduction, are stronger than sex. *Like power, sex never has the last word.* In *The Empire of The Senses*, a film that from end to end is occupied with the sex act, the latter, by its very persistence, comes to be possessed by the logic of another order. The film is unintelligible in terms of sex, for sexual pleasure, by itself, leads to everything but death. But the madness that seizes hold of the couple (a madness only for us, in reality it is a rigorous logic) pushes them to extremes, where meaning no longer has sense and the exercise of the senses is not in the least sensual. Nor is it intelligible in terms of mysticism or metaphysics. Its logic is one of challenge, impelled by the two partners outbidding each other. Or more precisely, the key event is the passage from a logic of pleasure at the beginning, where the man leads the game, to a logic of challenge and death, that occurs under the impetus of the woman – who thereby becomes the game's mistress, even if at first she was only a sexual object. It is the feminine principle that brings about the reversal of sex/value into an agonistic logic of seduction.

There is here no perversion or morbid drive, no interpreta-

tion drawn from our psycho-sexual frontiers, no "affinity" of Eros for Thanatos nor any ambivalence of desire. It is not a matter of sex, nor of the unconscious. The sexual act is viewed as a ritual act, ceremonial or warlike, for which (as in ancient tragedies on the theme of incest) death is the mandatory denouement, the emblematic form of the challenge's fulfillment.



Thus the obscene can seduce, as can sex and pleasure. Even the most anti-seductive figures can become figures of seduction. (It has been said of the feminist discourse that, beyond its total absence of seduction, there lies a certain homosexual allure). These figures need only move beyond their truth into a reversible configuration, a configuration that is also that of their death. The same holds true for that figure of anti-seduction *par excellence*, power.

Power seduces. But not in the vulgar sense of the masses' desire for complicity (a tautology that ultimately seeks to ground seduction in the *desire of others*). No, power seduces by virtue of the reversibility that haunts it, and on which a minor cycle is instituted. No more dominant and dominated, no more victims and executioners (but "exploiters" and "exploited," they certainly exist, though quite separately, for there is no reversibility in production – but then nothing essential happens at this level). No more *separate* positions: power is realized according to a duel relation, whereby it throws a challenge to society, and its existence is challenged in return. If power cannot be "exchanged" in accord with this minor cycle of seduction, challenge and ruse, then it quite simply disappears.

At bottom, power does not exist. The unilateral character of the relation of forces on which the "structure" and "reality" of power and its perpetual movement are supposedly instituted, does not exist. This is the dream of power imposed by reason, not its reality. Everything seeks its own death, including power. Or rather, everything demands to be exchanged, reversed, and abolished within a cycle (this is why neither repression nor the unconscious exist, for reversibility is always already there). *This alone is profoundly seductive.* Power

seduces only when it becomes a challenge to itself; otherwise it is just an exercise, and satisfies only the hegemonic logic of reason.

Seduction is stronger than power because it is reversible and mortal, while power, like value, seeks to be irreversible, cumulative and immortal. Power partakes of all the illusions of production, and of the real; it wants to be real, and so tends to become its own imaginary, its own superstition (with the help of theories that analyze it, be they to contest it). Seduction, on the other hand, is not of the order of the real – and is never of the order of force, nor relations of force. But precisely for this reason, it enmeshes all power's *real* actions, as well as the entire reality of production, in this unremitting reversibility and disaccumulation – *without which there would be neither power nor accumulation*.

It is the emptiness behind, or at the very heart of power and production; it is this emptiness that today gives them their last glimmer of reality. Without that which reverses, annuls, and seduces them, they would never have had the authority of reality.

The real, moreover, has never interested anyone. It is a place of disenchantment, a simulacrum of accumulation against death. And there is nothing more tiresome. What sometimes renders the real fascinating – and the truth as well – is the imaginary catastrophe which lies behind it. Do you think that power, sex, economics – all these real, really big things – would have held up for a single moment unless sustained by fascination, a fascination that comes precisely from the mirror image in which they are reflected, from their continuous reversion, the palpable pleasure borne of their imminent catastrophe?

The real, particularly in the present, is nothing more than the stockpiling of dead matter, dead bodies and dead language – a residual sedimentation. Still we feel more secure when the *stock of reality* is assessed (the ecological lament speaks of material energies, but it conceals that what is disappearing is the *real's energy*, the real's reality, the possibility of its management, whether capitalist or revolutionary). If the horizon of production is beginning to vanish, that of speech, sex or desire can still take up the slack. To liberate, to give pleasure, to give

a speech, to give speech to others: this is real, it is something substantial, with a prospect of stocks. And, therefore, it is power.

Unfortunately not. That is to say, not for long. This "reality" is slowly dissipating. One wants sex, like power, to become an irreversible instance, and desire an irreversible energy (a *stock* of energy – desire, need it be said, is never far from capital). For we grant meaning only to what is irreversible: accumulation, progress, growth, production. Value, energy and desire imply irreversible processes – that is the very meaning of their liberation. (Inject the smallest dose of reversibility into our economic, political, sexual or institutional mechanisms, and everything collapses). This is what today assures sexuality of its mythical authority over hearts and bodies. But it is also what lies behind the fragility of sex, and of the entire edifice of production.

Seduction is stronger than production. It is stronger than sexuality, with which it must never be confused. It is not something internal to sexuality, though this is what it is generally reduced to. It is a circular, reversible process of challenges, oneupmanship and death. It is, on the contrary, sex that is the debased form, circumscribed as it is by the terms of energy and desire.

Seduction's entanglement with production and power, the irruption of a minimal reversibility within every irreversible process, such that the latter are secretly undermined, while simultaneously ensured of that minimal continuum of pleasure without which they would be nothing – this is what must be analyzed. At the same time knowing that production constantly seeks to eliminate seduction in order to establish itself on an economy of relations of force alone; and that sex, the production of sex, seeks to eliminate seduction in order to establish itself on an economy of relations of desire alone.



This is why one must completely turn round what Foucault has to say in *The History of Sexuality I*, while still accepting its central hypothesis. Foucault sees only the *production* of sex as discourse. He is fascinated by the irreversible deployment

and interstitial saturation of a field of speech, which is at the same time the institution of a field of power, culminating in a field of knowledge that reflects (or invents) it. But from whence does power derive its somnambulistic functionality, this irresistible vocation to saturate space? If neither sociality nor sexuality exist unless reclaimed and staged by power, perhaps power too does not exist unless reclaimed and staged by knowledge (theory). In which case, the entire ensemble should be placed in simulation, and this too perfect mirror inverted, even if the "truth effects" it produces are marvelously decipherable.

Furthermore, the equation of power with knowledge, this convergence of mechanisms over a field of rule they have seemingly swept clean, this conjunction described by Foucault as complete and operational, is perhaps only the concurrence of two dead stars whose last glimmerings still illuminate each other, though they have lost their own radiance? In their original, authentic phase, knowledge and power were opposed to each other, sometimes violently (as were, moreover, sex and power). But if today they are merging, is this not due to the progressive extenuation of their reality principle, of their distinctive characteristics, their specific energies? Their conjunction then would herald not a reinforced positivity, but a twin indifferentiation, at the end of which only their phantoms would remain, mingling amongst themselves, left to haunt us.

In the last instance, behind the apparent *stasis* of knowledge and power which appears to arise from all sides, there would lie only the *metastasis* of power, the cancerous proliferation of a disturbed, disorganized structure. If power today is general, and can be detected at all levels ("molecular" power), if it has become cancerous, with its cells proliferating uncontrollably, without regard to the good old "genetic code" of politics, this is because it is itself afflicted and in a state of advanced decomposition. Or perhaps it is afflicted with hyperreality and in an acute crisis of simulation (the cancerous proliferation of only the *signs* of power) and, accordingly, has reached a state of general diffusion and saturation. Its somnambulistic operability.

One must therefore always wager on simulation and take the

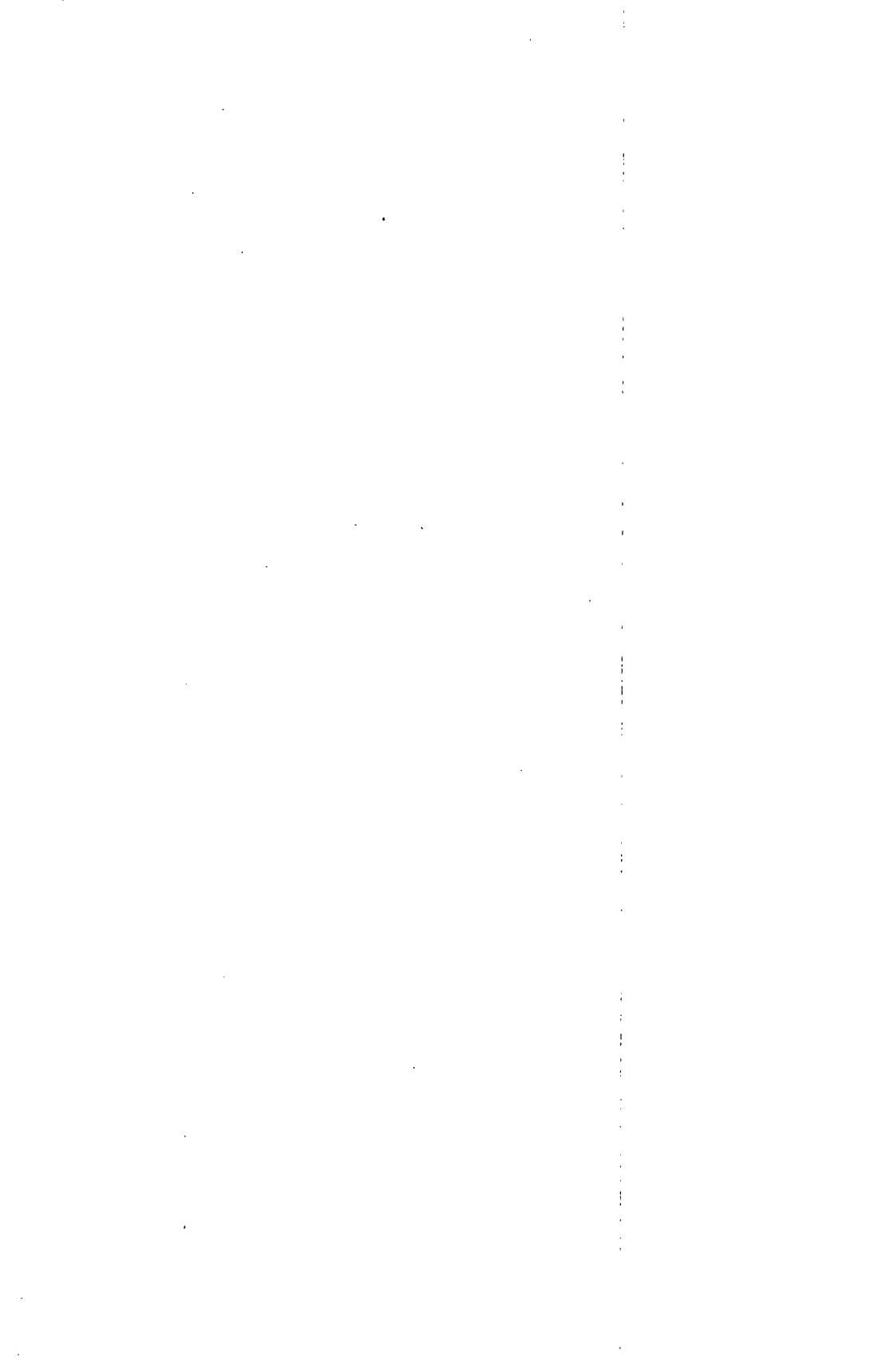
signs from behind – signs that, when taken at face value and in good faith, always lead to the reality and evidence of power. Just as they lead to the reality and evidence of sex and production. It is this positivism that must not be taken at face value; and it is to this reversion of power in simulation one must devote one's efforts. Power will never do it by itself; and Foucault's text should be criticized for failing to do it and, therefore, for reviving the illusion of power.

The whole, obsessed as it is with maximizing power and sex, must be questioned as to its emptiness. Given its obsession with power as continuous expansion and investment, one must ask it the question of the reversion of the space of power, and of the reversion of the space of sex and its speech. Given its fascination with production, one must ask it the question of seduction.

II



## SUPERFICIAL ABYSSES





## THE SACRED HORIZON OF APPEARANCES

Seduction takes from discourse its sense and turns it from its truth. It is, therefore, contrary to the psychoanalytic distinction between manifest and latent discourses. For the latent discourse turns the manifest discourse not *from* its truth, but *towards* its truth. It makes the manifest discourse say what it does not want to say; it causes determinations and profound indeterminations to show through in the manifest discourse. Depth always peeks through from behind the break, and meaning peeks from behind the line. The manifest discourse has the status of an appearance, a laboured appearance, traversed by the emergence of meaning. Interpretation is what breaks the appearance and play of the manifest discourse and, by taking up with the latent discourse, delivers the real meaning.

In seduction, by contrast, it is the manifest discourse – discourse at its most superficial – that turns back on the deeper order (whether conscious or unconscious) in order to invalidate it, substituting the charm and illusion of appearances. These appearances are not in the least frivolous, but occasions for a game and its stakes, and a passion for deviation – the seduction of the signs themselves being more important than the emergence of any truth – which interpretation neglects and destroys in its search for hidden meanings. This is why interpretation is what, *par excellence*, is opposed to seduction, and why

it is the least seductive of discourses. Not only does it subject the domain of appearances to incalculable damage, but this privileged search for hidden meanings may well be profoundly in error. For it is not somewhere else, in a *binterwelt* or an unconscious, that one will find what leads discourse astray. What truly displaces discourse, “seduces” it in the literal sense, and renders it seductive, is its very appearance, its inflections, its nuances, the circulation (whether aleatory and senseless, or ritualized and meticulous) of signs at its surface. It is this that effaces meaning and is seductive, while a discourse’s meaning has never seduced anyone. *All meaningful discourse seeks to end appearances*: this is its attraction, and its imposture. It is also an impossible undertaking. Inexorably, discourse is left to its appearances, and thus to the stakes of seduction, thus to *its own failure as discourse*. But perhaps discourse is secretly tempted by this failure, by the bracketing of its objectives, of its truth effects which become absorbed within a surface that swallows meaning. This is what happens at first, when discourse *seduces itself*; it is the original form by which discourse becomes absorbed within itself and emptied of its truth in order to better fascinate others: the primitive seduction of language.

Every discourse is complicit in this rapture, in this deviation, and if it does not do it itself, then others will do it in its place. All appearances conspire to combat and root out meaning (whether intentional or otherwise), and turn it into a game, into another of the game’s rules, a more arbitrary rule – or into another elusive ritual, one that is more adventurous and seductive than the directive line of meaning. What discourse must fight against is not so much the unconscious secret as the superficial abyss of its own appearance; and if discourse must triumph over something, it is not over phantasies and hallucinations heavy with meaning and misinterpretation, but the shiny surface of non-sense and all the games that the latter renders possible. It was only a short while ago that one succeeded in eliminating this stake of seduction (which has as its concern the sacred horizon of appearances) in order to substitute a stake “in depth,” a stake in the unconscious, or in interpretation. But this substitution is fragile and ephemeral. No one knows if the reigning obsession with latent discourse one

finds in psychoanalysis (which in effect, generalizes the violence of interpretation to all levels), if this mechanism with which one has eliminated (or sought to eliminate) all seduction is not itself a model of simulation – a rather fragile one that gives itself the semblance of being insurmountable in order to better conceal all parallel effects, and most notably, the effects of seduction that are beginning to work their damage. For what is most damaging to psychoanalysis is the realization that the unconscious seduces: it seduces by its dreams and by its concept; it seduces as soon as the id speaks and even as the id wishes to speak. A double structure emerges, a parallel structure of the connivance of the signs of the unconscious and their exchange, which eats away at the other structure, the hard, pure structure of unconscious “labour” and transference and counter-transference. The entire psychoanalytic edifice perishes of its own seduction, and with it all the others. Let us be analysts for one blazing instant, and say that it is the revenge of the repressed, the repression of seduction, that is at the origin of psychoanalysis as a “science,” within the intellectual trajectory of Freud himself.

★ ★ ★

The Freudian *oeuvre* unfolds between two poles that radically put into question the intermediary construction, these poles being seduction and the death drive. We have already spoken in *L'Échange symbolique et la mort* of the latter, considered as an inversion of the earlier psychoanalytic apparatus (topical, economic). Regarding the former, which after numerous turns links up with the death drive by some secret affinity, one has to say that it appears as psychoanalysis’ lost object.

It is classic to consider Freud’s abandonment of the theory of seduction (1907) as a decisive step in the emergence of psychoanalytic theory and in moving to the foreground the notions of unconscious phantasy, psychic reality, infantile sexuality, etc.

Laplanche and Pontalis  
*Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*

Seduction, as an original form, is considered related to the state of the "primal phantasy" and thus treated, according to a logic that is not longer its own, as a residue, a vestige, or screen/formation in the henceforth triumphant logic and structure of psychic and sexual reality. But instead of considering seduction's downgrading as necessary to psychoanalysis' growth, one shoud think of it as a crucial event, heavy with consequences. As we know, seduction will disappear from psychoanalytic discourse, or will reappear only to be burried and forgotten, in accord with a logical repetition of the foundational act of denial by the master himself. It is not simply set aside as something secondary relative to the more decisive elements like infantile sexuality, repression, Oedipus, etc.; it is denied as a dangerous form that could well threaten the development and coherence of the ulterior edifice.

Exactly the same thing occurs in Saussure as in Freud. Saussure also began, in the *Anagrammes*, with a description of a form of language, or more precisely, of its subversion – a ritualized, meticulous form of the deconstruction of meaning and value. But then he took it all back and moved on to the construction of linguistics. Was this turn due to the manifest failure of his attempted proofs, or did it involve a renunciation of the anagrammatical challenge in order to undertake the more constructive, durable and scientific development of the mode of production of meaning, to the exclusion of its possible subversion? But what does it matter, the fact is that linguistics was born from this irrevocable redeployment, and it constitutes the fundamental axiom and rule for all those who continue Saussure's work. One does not return to the scene of the crime, and the forgetting of the original murder is part of the logical and triumphant unfolding of science. All the energy of the dead object and its last rites passes into the simulated resurrection of the living. Still it must be said that Saussure, at least, had the intuition towards the end that his linguistic enterprise had failed, leaving a hovering uncertainty, the glimpse of a weakness, of the possibly illusory character of so beautiful a mechanism of substitution. But such scruples, within which one can perceive something of the premature and violent burial of the *Anagrammes*, would be totally foreign to his heirs, who remain

content to manage the discipline without ever touching on the idea of an abyss of language, an abyss of linguistic seduction, a radically different operation that absorbs rather than produces meaning. The sarcophagus of linguistics was tightly sealed, and fell upon the shroud of the signifier.



Thus the shroud of psychoanalysis has fallen over seduction, the shroud of hidden meanings and of a hidden excess of meaning, at the expense of the surface of absorption, the superficial abyss of appearances, the instantaneous and panicky surface of the exchange and rivalry of signs constituted by seduction (hysteria being but a "symptomatic" manifestation of the latter, one that has already been contaminated by the latent structure of the symptom, and is thus pre-psychanalytic, thus degraded – which is why it was able to serve as a "conversion matrix" for psychoanalysis). Freud abolished seduction in order to put into place a machinery of interpretation, and of sexual repression, that offer all the characteristics of objectivity and coherence. Assuming that one disregards all the internal convulsions of psychoanalysis, be they personal or theoretical, that undermine its beautiful coherence – lest all the challenges and seductions buried under the discourse's rigour reemerge like the living dead. (But doesn't this suggest, so the beautiful souls will argue, that, at bottom, psychoanalysis is still alive?). Freud may have broken with seduction and taken the side of interpretation (at least until the last metapsychology which, very definitely, moves in a different direction), but all that was repressed by this admirable realignment has reemerged within the conflicts and vicissitudes of psychoanalysis' history, and within the course of almost every cure (one is never finished with hysteria!). And it is not an inconsiderable source of entertainment to see seduction sweep across psychoanalysis with Lacan, in the wild-eyed form of a play of signifiers from which psychoanalysis – in the rigour of its demands and in its form, in the form Freud wanted – is dying just as certainly, nay even more certainly, as from its institutional banalization.

The seduction of Lacanianism is, no doubt, an imposture;

but in its own way it corrects, rectifies and atones for the original imposture of Freud himself, that of the foreclosure of the form/seduction to the advantage of a would-be science. The Lacanian discourse, which generalizes the seductive practices of psychoanalysis, avenges this foreclosed seduction, but in a manner that is itself contaminated by psychoanalysis. That is to say, the vengeance always occurs within the terms of the Law (of the symbolic), resulting in an insidious seduction exercised in terms of the law and (of the effigy) of a Master who rules by the Word over hysterical masses unfit for pleasure...

Nonetheless, with Lacan it is still a matter of the death of psychoanalysis, of a death due to the triumphant but posthumous reemergence of what at the beginning was denied. Isn't this the fulfillment of a destiny? At least psychoanalysis will have had the opportunity to end with a Great Impostor after having begun with a Great Denial.

That the most beautiful construction of meaning and interpretation ever erected thus collapses under the weight of its own signs, which were once terms heavy with meaning, but have once again become devices in an unrestrained seduction, terms in an untrammeled exchange that is both complicit with and empty of meaning (including in the cure) – this should exalt and comfort us. It is a sign that the truth at least (that for which impostors reign) will be spared us. And that what might appear as psychoanalysis' failure is but the temptation common to every great system of meaning, to sink into its own image and lose its sense – which indeed suggests the return of primitive seduction's flame and the revenge of appearances. But then where is the imposture? Having rejected the form/seduction from the start, psychoanalysis was perhaps only an illusion – an illusion of truth and interpretation – that would be contradicted and counterbalanced by the Lacanian illusion of seduction. Thus a cycle is completed, from which perhaps other interrogative and seductive forms will arise.

It was the same with God and the Revolution. To dispel all appearances so that God's truth could shine forth was the illusion of the Iconoclasts. An illusion because God's truth did not exist, and perhaps secretly they knew it, this being why their failure proceeded from the same intuition as that of the adorers

of images: *one can live only the idea of altered truth.* It is the only way to live in conformity with the truth. Otherwise life becomes unbearable (precisely because *the truth does not exist*). One need not want to dispel appearances (the seduction of images). But if one does, it is imperative that one not succeed lest the absence of the truth become manifest. Or the absence of God, or the Revolution. The Revolution, and in particular its ape-like travesty, Stalinism, lives only by the idea that everything is opposed to it. Stalinism is indestructible because it exists only in order to conceal the non-existence of the Revolution and its truth, and thereby to restore hope. "The people" Rivarol said, "did not want a Revolution, they wanted only its spectacle" – because this is the only way to preserve the Revolution's appeal, instead of abolishing it in its truth.

"We do not believe that the truth remains true once the veil has been lifted" (Nietzsche).



## TROMPE L'OEIL OR ENCHANTED SIMULATION

Disenchanted simulation: pornography – truer than true – the height of the simulacrum.

Enchanted simulation: the *trompe-l'oeil* – falser than false – the secret of appearances.

Neither fable, story or composition, nor theater, scene or action. The *trompe l'oeil* forgets all this and bypasses it by the low-level representation of second-rate objects. The latter figure in the great compositions of the time, but here they appear alone, as though the discourse on painting had been eliminated. Suddenly they no longer “represent,” they are no longer objects, no longer anything. They are blank, empty signs that bespeak a social, religious or artistic anti-ceremony or anti-representation. Scraps of social life, they turn against the latter and parody its theatricality; this is why they are scattered, juxtaposed at random. The implication being that *these objects are not objects*. They do not describe a familiar reality, as does a still life. They describe a void, an absence, the absence of every representational hierarchy that organizes the elements of a tableau, or for that matter, the political order...

These are not mere extras displaced from the main scene, but ghosts that haunt the emptiness of the stage. Theirs is not the aesthetic appeal of painting and resemblance, but the acute, metaphysical appeal of the real's abolition. Haunted objects,

metaphysical objects, in their unreal reversion they are opposed to the entire representative space of the Renaissance.

Their very insignificance is offensive. Objects without referents, stripped of their decor – old newspapers, books, nails, boards, and scraps of food – isolated, decayed, spectral objects, disincarnated from all narrative, they alone were able to trace an obsession with a lost reality, something akin to life before the subject and his acquisition of consciousness. “For the transparent, allusive image that the art lover expects, the *trompe l’oeil* tends to substitute the intractable opacity of Presence” (Pierre Charpentrat). Simulacra without perspective, the figures in *trompe l’oeil* appear suddenly, with lustrous exactitude, as though denuded of the aura of meaning and bathed in ether. Pure appearances, they have the irony of too much reality.



There is no nature in the *trompe l’oeil*, nor landscapes, skies, vanishing points or natural light. Nor faces, psychology or historicity. Everything is artifact. A vertical backdrop raises objects isolated from their referential context to the status of pure signs.

Translucency, suspense, fragility, obsolescence – hence the insistence on paper (frayed at the edges), the letter, the mirror or watch, the faded, untimely signs of a transcendence that has vanished into the quotidian. The mirror of worn-out boards whose knots and rings mark the time, like a clock without hands that leaves one to guess the hour: these are things that have lasted, in a time that has already passed. Anachrony alone stands out, the involuted representation of time and space.

There are no fruits, meats or flowers, no baskets or bouquets, nor any of the delightful things found in (a still) life. Nature is carnal, and a still life is a carnal arrangement on a horizontal plane, that provided by the ground or a table. Although a still life may sometimes play with disorder, with the ragged edge of things and the fragility of their use, it always retains the gravity of real things, as underscored by the horizontalness. Whereas the *trompe l’oeil* functions in weightlessness, as indicated by the vertical backdrop, everything being suspended, the objects,

time, even light and perspective. While the still life uses classic shapes and shades, the shadows borne by the *trompe l'oeil* lack the depth that comes from a *real* luminous source. Like the obsolescence of objects, they are the sign of a slight vertigo, the vertigo of a previous life, of an appearance prior to reality.

This mysterious light without origin, whose oblique rays are no longer real, is like stagnant water, water without depth, soft to the touch like a natural death. Here things have long since lost their shadows (their substance). Something other than the sun shines on them, a brighter star, without an atmosphere, or with an ether that doesn't refract. Perhaps death illuminates these things directly, and that is their sole meaning? These shadows do not move with the sun; they do not grow with the evening; without movement, they appear as an inevitable edging. Not the result of chiaroscuro, nor a skilful dialectic of light and shadow (for these are still painterly effects), they suggest the transparency of objects to a black sun.

One senses that these objects are approaching the black hole from which, for us, reality, the real world, and normal time emerge. With this forward decentering effect, this advance towards the subject of a mirror object, it is the appearance of the double, in the guise of trivial objects, that creates the effect of seduction, the startling impression characteristic of the *trompe l'oeil*: a tactile vertigo that recounts the subject's insane desire to obliterate his own image, and thereby vanish. For reality grips us only when we lose ourselves in it, or when it reappears as our own, hallucinated death.

A vague physical wish to grasp things, but which having been suspended, becomes metaphysical: the objects of the *trompe l'oeil* have something of the same fantastic vivacity as the child's discovery of his own image, an unmediated hallucination anterior to the perceptual order.

If there is a miracle of *trompe l'oeil*, it does not lie in the realism of its execution, like the grapes of Zeuxis which appeared so real that birds came to peck at them. This is absurd. Miracles never result from a surplus of reality but, on the contrary, from a sudden break in reality and the giddiness of feeling oneself fall. It is this loss of reality that the *surreal* familiarity of objects translates. With the disintegration of this hierarchi-

cal organization of space that privileges the eye and vision, of this perspectival simulation – for it is merely a simulacrum – something emerges that, for want of something better, we express in terms of *touch*, a tactile hyperpresence of things, “as though one could hold them.” But this tactile fantasy has nothing to do with our sense of touch; it is a metaphor for the “seizure” resulting from the annihilation of the scene and space of representation. Suddenly this seizure rebounds onto the so-called “real” world, to reveal that this “reality” is naught but a staged world, objectified in accord with the rules of perspective. “Reality” appears as a *principle*, one that defines the painting, sculpture and architecture of the period, but a principle nonetheless – that is, a simulacrum which the experimental hypersimulation of the *trompe l’oeil* undermines.



The *trompe l’oeil* does not seek to confuse itself with the real. Consciously produced by means of play and artifice, it presents itself as a simulacrum. By mimicking the third dimension, it questions the reality of this dimension, and by mimicking and exceeding the effects of the real, it radically questions the reality principle.

The real is relinquished by *the very excess of its appearances*. The objects resemble themselves too much, this resemblance being like a second state; and by virtue of this *allegorical* resemblance, and of the diagonal lighting, they point to the irony of too much reality.

Depth appears to have been turned inside out. While the Renaissance organized all space in accord with a distant vanishing point, perspective in the *trompe l’oeil* is, in a sense, projected forward. Instead of fleeing before the panoramic sweep of the eye (the privilege of panoptic vision), the objects “fool” the eye (“*trompent l’oeil*”) by a sort of internal depth – not by causing one to believe in a world that does not exist, but by undermining the privileged position of the gaze. The eye, instead of generating a space that spreads out, is but the internal vanishing point for a convergence of objects. A different universe occupies the foreground, a universe without horizon or

horizontality, like an opaque mirror placed before the eye, with nothing behind it. This is, properly speaking, the realm of appearances, where there is nothing to see, where things see you. They do not flee before your gaze, but position themselves in front of you, with a light that seems to come from another world, with shadows that never quite give them a true third dimension. For this dimension, that of perspective, always indicates the bad conscience of the sign relative to reality – a bad conscience that has eaten away at all painting since the Renaissance.

Whence independent of the aesthetic pleasure, comes the uncanniness of the *trompe l'oeil* – the strange light it casts on this entirely new, western reality which emerged triumphant with the Renaissance. The *trompe l'oeil* is the *ironic simulacrum* of that reality. It is what surrealism was to the functionalist revolution of the early twentieth century – surrealism being but an ironic reverie on the principle of functionality. And like *trompe l'oeil* surrealism is not quite part of art or art history, for their concern is with a metaphysical dimension, and not with matters of style. They attack our sense of reality or functionality and, therefore, our sense of consciousness. They seek out the wrong or reverse side of things, and undermine the world's apparent factuality. This is why the pleasure that they give us, their seductiveness, however small, is radical; for it comes from a radical surprise borne of appearances, from a life prior to the mode of production of the real world.



The *trompe l'oeil* is no longer confined to painting. Like stucco, its contemporary, it can do anything, mimic or parody anything. It has become the prototype for the malevolent use of appearances. What began as a game took on fantastic dimensions in the XVIth century, and ended up eliminating the boundaries between painting, sculpture and architecture. In the murals and ceiling paintings of the Renaissance and Baroque, painting and sculpture converge. In the *trompe l'oeil* murals and streets of Los Angeles, architecture is deceived and defaced by illusion. The seduction of space by the signs of space. Having said

so much about the production of space, is it not time to speak about its seduction?

★ ★ ★

And about the seduction of political space. For example, the studiolas of the Duke of Urbino and Federigo da Montefeltre in the ducal palace of Urbino and Gubbio: tiny sanctuaries entirely in *trompe l'oeil* at the heart of the immense space of the palace. The latter exemplifies the triumph of an architectural perspective, of a space deployed according to the rules, while the studiolo appears as an inverted microcosm. Cut off from the rest of the structure, without windows, literally without space – *here space is, actualized by simulation*. If the palace as a whole constitutes the architectural act *par excellence*, the manifest discourse of art (and power), then what is one to make of the minuscule studiolo that adjoins the chapel like yet another sacred place, but with an air of bewitchment? It is not clear what is happening with regard to space, and consequently, to the entire system of representations that gives order to the palace and republic.

It is a *privatissime* space, the prerogative of the Prince, like incest and transgression were once kingly prerogatives. A complete reversal of the rules of the game is in effect here, allowing us to surmise ironically, by the allegory of the *trompe l'oeil*, that the external space, that of the palace, and beyond it, the city, that is, the political space, the locus of power, *is itself perhaps only an effect of perspective*. Such a dangerous secret, such a radical hypothesis, the Prince must keep to himself in the strictest secrecy: *for it is the very secret of his power*.

Since Machiavelli politicians have perhaps always known that the mastery of a *simulated* space is at the source of their power, that politics is not a *real* activity, but a simulation model, whose manifest acts are but actualized impressions. It is this blind spot within the palace, cut off from architecture and public life, which in a sense reigns supreme, not by direct determination, but by a sort of internal reversion, by an abrogation of the rules enacted in secret, as in primitive rituals. A hole in reality, an ironic transfiguration, an exact simulacrum hidden at the

heart of reality, and on which the latter depends for its functioning. *This is the secret of appearances.*

Thus the Pope, the Grand Inquisitor, the great Jesuits and theologians all knew that God did not exist; this was their secret, and the secret of their strength. Similarly Montefeltre's studio-lo in *trompe l'oeil* secretly suggests that, in the last instance, reality does not exist, that "real" in-depth space, including political space, is always potentially reversible – the secret that once commanded politics, but which have since been lost in the illusion of the masses' "reality."



## I'LL BE YOUR MIRROR

In the *trompe l'oeil*, whether a mirror or painting, we are bewitched by the spell of the *missing dimension*. It is the latter that establishes the space of seduction and becomes a source of vertigo. For if the divine mission of all things is to find their meaning, or to find a structure on which to base their meaning, they also seek, by virtue of a diabolical nostalgia, to lose themselves in appearances, in the seduction of their image. That it to say, they seek to unite what should be separated into a single effect of death and seduction. Narcissus.

Seduction cannot possibly be represented, because in seduction the distance between the real and its double, and the distortion between the Same and the Other, is abolished. Bending over a pool of water, Narcissus quenches his thirst. His image is no longer “other;” it is a surface that absorbs and seduces him, which he can approach but never pass beyond. For there is no beyond, just as there is no reflexive distance between him and his image. The mirror of water is not a surface of reflection, but of absorption.

This is why of all the great figures of seduction in mythology and art – who seduce by a look, a song, an absence, by rouge, beauty or monstrosity, by masks or madness, by their fame, but also their failure and death – Narcissus stands out with singular force.

Not a mirror-reflection, in which the subject finds himself transformed – not a mirror phase, in which the subject establishes himself within the imaginary. All this belongs to the psychological domain of alterity and identity, not seduction.

All reflection theory is impoverished, particularly the idea that seduction is rooted in the attraction of like to like, in a mimetic exaltation of one's own image, or an ideal mirage of resemblance. Thus Vincent Descombes, in *L'Inconscient malgré lui*, writes:

What seduces is not some feminine wile, but the fact that it is directed at you. It is seductive to be seduced, and consequently, it is being seduced that is seductive. In other words, the being seduced finds himself in the person seducing. What the person seduced sees in the one who seduces him, the unique object of his fascination, is his own seductive, charming self, his lovable self-image...

It is always a matter of self-seduction and its psychological vicissitudes. In the narcissistic *myth*, however, the mirror does not exist so that Narcissus can find within himself some living ideal. It is a matter of the mirror as an absence of depth, as a superficial abyss, which others find seductive and vertiginous only because they are each the first to be swallowed up in it.

All seduction in this sense is narcissistic, and its secret lies with this mortal absorption. Thus women, being closer to this other, hidden mirror (with which they shroud their image and body) are also closer to the effects of seduction. Men, by contrast, have depth, but no secrets; hence their power and fragility.

If seduction does not proceed from some ideal mirage of the subject, nor does it result from the mirror ideal of death. In Pausanias' version:

Narkissos had a twin sister, they were exactly the same to look at with just the same hairstyle and the same clothes, and they even used to go hunting together. Narkissos was in love with his sister, and when she died he used to visit the spring; he

knew that what he saw was his own reflection, but even so he found some relief in telling himself it was his sister's image.

*Guide to Greece*. Vol. I, p. 376

According to H.-P. Jeudy, who accepts this version, Narcissus seduces himself, and conquers his power of seduction, only by embracing mimetically the lost image, restored by his own face, of his deceased twin sister.

But is a mimetic relation with the image of the deceased really necessary to investigate narcissistic vertigo? In truth, the latter has no need of a twin refraction. Its own illusion will do – which is perhaps the illusion of its own death. Perhaps death is always incestuous – a fact that would only add to its spell. The “soul sister” is its spiritualized version. The great stories of seduction, that of Phaedra or Isolde, are stories of incest, and always end in death. What are we to conclude, if not that death itself awaits us in the age-old temptation of incest, including *in the incestuous relation we maintain with our own image*? We are seduced by the latter because it consoles us with the imminent death of our sacrilegious existence. Our mortal self-absorption with our image consoles us for the irreversibility of our having been born and having to reproduce. It is by this sensual, incestuous transaction with our image, our double, and our death, that we gain our power of seduction.



“*I'll be your mirror*” does not signify “*I'll be your reflection*” but “*I'll be your deception*.”

*To seduce is to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion.* It is to be taken in by one's own illusion and move in an enchanted world. It is the power of the seductive woman who takes herself for her own desire, and delights in the self-deception in which others, in their turn, will be caught. Narcissus too loses himself in his own illusory image; that is why he turns from his truth, and by his example turns others from their truth – and so becomes a model of love.

The strategy of seduction is one of deception. It lies in wait

for all that tends to confuse itself with its reality. And it is potentially a source of fabulous strength. For if production can only produce objects or real signs, and thereby obtain some power; seduction, by producing only illusions, obtains all powers, including the power to return production and reality to their fundamental illusion.

It even lies in wait for the unconscious and desire, by turning them into a mirror of the unconscious and desire. For the latter concerns only drives and their gratification, while the enchantment begins only after one has been taken in by one's desire. It is the illusion that, happily, saves us from "psychic reality." And it is the illusion of psychoanalysis, which confuses itself with its own desire for psychoanalysis and thereby enters into seduction, into auto-seduction, refracting the latter's power for its own ends.

Thus all science, reality, and production only postpone the due date of seduction, which shines as non-sense, as the sensual and intelligible form of non-sense, in the sky of their desire.

The deception's *raison d'être*. Like the hawk that returns to a piece of red leather in the form of a bird, is it not the same illusion that, within repetition, confers an absolute reality onto the object that wins? Beyond all question of belief, warranted or unwarranted, the deception is, in a sense, . Narcissus, having lost his twin sister, mourns her loss, by constituting his own face into an illusory attraction. Neither conscious nor unconscious, the dupery is fully played out and sufficient unto itself.

H.-P. Jeudy

The deception can be inscribed in the sky; its power will not be diminished. Every sign of the Zodiac has its form of seduction. For we all seek the favour of a meaningless fate, and place our hopes in the spell that might result from some absolutely irrational conjuncture – here lies the strength of the horoscope and zodiacal signs. No one should laugh at astrology, for he who no longer seeks to seduce the stars is the sadder for

it. In effect, many a person's misfortune comes from their not having a place in the sky, within a field of signs that would agree with them – that is to say, in the last instance, from their not having been seduced by their birth and its constellation. They will bear this fate for life, and their very death will come at the wrong time. To fail to be seduced by one's sign is far more serious than the failure to have one's merits rewarded or one's desire gratified. Symbolic discredit is always much more serious than a real defect or misfortune.

Thus the charitable idea of founding an Institute of Zodiacial Semiurgy where, just as one's physical appearance can be corrected by plastic surgery, the injustices of the Sign could be righted and the horoscope's orphans finally receive the Sign of their choice in order that they might be reconciled with themselves. It would be a great success, at least the equal of that of the suicide motels where people will come to die in the manner of their choosing.



## DEATH IN SAMARKAND

An ellipsis of the sign, an eclipse of meaning: an illusion. The mortal distraction that a single sign can cause instantaneously.

Consider the story of the soldier who meets Death at a crossing in the marketplace, and believes he saw him make a menacing gesture in his direction. He rushes to the king's palace and asks the king for his best horse in order that he might flee during the night far from Death, as far as Samarkand. Upon which the king summons Death to the palace and reproaches him for having frightened one of his best servants. But Death, astonished, replies: "I didn't mean to frighten him. It was just that I was surprised to see this soldier here, when we had a rendez-vous tomorrow in Samarkand."

Yes, one runs towards one's fate all the more surely by seeking to escape it. Yes, everyone seeks his own death, and the failed acts are the most successful. Yes, signs follow an unconscious course. But all this concerns the *truth* of the rendez-vous in Samarkand; it does not account for the *seduction* of the story, which is in no way an apologue of truth.

What is astounding about the story is that this seemingly inevitable rendez-vous need not have taken place. There is nothing to suggest that the soldier would have been in Samarkand without this chance encounter, and without the ill-luck of

Death's *naïve* gesture, which *acted in spite of itself as a gesture of seduction*. Had Death been content to call the soldier back to order, the story would lose its charm. Everything here is hinged on a single, involuntary sign. The gesture does not appear to be part of a strategy, nor even an unconscious ruse; yet it takes on the unexpected depth of seduction, that is, it appears as something that moves laterally, as a sign that, unbeknownst to the protagonists (including Death, as well as the soldier), advances a deadly command, an aleatory sign behind which another conjunction, marvelous or disastrous, is being enacted. A conjunction that gives the sign's trajectory all the characteristics of a *witticism*.

No one in the story has anything to reproach himself with – or else the king who lent his horse, is as guilty as anyone else. No. Behind the apparent liberty of the two central characters (Death was free to make his gesture, the soldier to flee), they were both following a rule of which neither were aware. The rule of this game, which, like every fundamental rule, must remain secret, is that death is not a brute event, but *only occurs through seduction*, that is, by way of an instantaneous, indecipherable complicity, by a sign or signs that will not be deciphered in time.

Death is a rendez-vous, not an objective destiny. Death cannot fail to go since he is this rendez-vous, that is, the allusive conjunction of signs and rules which make up the game. At the same time, Death is an innocent player in the game. This is what gives the story its secret irony, whose resolution appears as a stroke of wit [*trait d'esprit*], and provides us with such sublime pleasure – and distinguishes it from a moral fable or a vulgar tale about the death instinct. The spiritual character [*trait spirituel*] of the story extends the spirited character [*trait d'esprit gestuel*] of Death's gesture, and the two seductions, that of Death and of the story, fuse together.

Death's astonishment is delightful, an astonishment at the frivolity of an arrangement where things proceed by chance: "But this soldier should have known that he was expected in Samarkand tomorrow, and taken his time to get there..." However Death shows only surprise, as if his existence did not depend as much as the soldier's on the fact that they were to meet in

Samarkand. Death lets things happen, and it is his casualness that makes him appealing – this is why the soldier hastens to join him.

None of this involves the unconscious, metaphysics or psychology. Or even strategy. Death has no plan. He restores chance with a chance gesture; this is how he works, yet everything still gets done. There is nothing that cannot not be done, yet everything still preserves the lightness of chance, of a furtive gesture, an accidental encounter or an illegible sign. That's how it is with seduction...

Moreover, the soldier went to meet death because he gave meaning to a meaningless gesture which did not even concern him. He took personally something that was not addressed to him, as one might mistake for oneself a smile meant for someone else. The height of seduction is to be without seduction. The man seduced is caught in spite of himself in a web of stray signs.

And it is because the sign has been turned from its meaning or "seduced," that the story itself is seductive. It is when signs are seduced that they become seductive.



Only signs without referents, empty, senseless, absurd and elliptical signs, absorb us.

A little boy asks a fairy to grant him his wishes. The fairy agrees on one condition, that he never think of the colour red in the fox's tail. "Is that all?" he replies offhandedly. And off he goes to find happiness. But what happens? He is unable to rid himself of this fox's tail, which he believed he had already forgotten. He sees it everywhere, with its red colour, in his thoughts, and in his dreams. Despite all his efforts, he cannot make it disappear. He becomes obsessed with this absurd, insignificant, but tenacious image, augmented by all the spite that comes from not having been able to rid himself of it. Not only do the fairy's promises not come true, but he loses his taste for life. Perhaps he dies without ever having gotten clear of it.

An absurd story, but absolutely plausible, for it *demonstrates the power of the insignificant signifier*, the power of a meaning-

less signifier.

The fairy was mischievous (she wasn't a good fairy). She knew that the mind is irresistibly attracted to a place devoid of meaning. Here the emptiness was seemingly provoked by the insignificance (this is why the child was not on his guard) of the colour red of a fox's tail. Elsewhere words and gestures are emptied of their meaning by unflagging repetition and scansion. To wear meaning out, to tire it out in order to liberate the pure seduction of the null signifier or empty term – such is the strength of ritual magic and incantation.

But it can just as well be a direct fascination with the void, as in the physical vertigo of a chasm, or the metaphorical vertigo of a door that opens onto the void. If you were to see written on a door panel: "This opens onto the void." – wouldn't you still want to open it?

That which looks onto nothing has every reason to be opened. That which doesn't say anything has every reason to never be forgotten. That which is arbitrary is simultaneously endowed with a total necessity. The predestination of the empty sign, the precession of the void, the vertigo of an obligation devoid of sense, a passion for necessity.

Here lies something of the secret of magic (the fairy was a magician). The power of words, their "symbolic efficacy" is greater when uttered in a void. When they have neither context nor referent, they can take on the power of a self-fulfilling (or self-defeating) prophecy. Like the colour red of a fox's tail. Unreal and insubstantial, it proves compelling because of its nullity. If the fairy had forbidden the child from doing something serious or significant, he would have pulled through easily, instead of being seduced against his will. For it is not the prohibition, *but its non-sense that seduces him*. Thus, against all logic, it is the improbable prophecies that come true; all that is required is that they not make too much sense. Otherwise they would not be prophecies. Such is the bewitchment of magical speech, such is the sorcery of seduction.

This is why neither magic nor seduction concerns belief or make-believe, for they employ signs without credibility and gestures without referents; their logic is not one of mediation, but of immediacy, whatever the sign.

Proof is unnecessary. Everybody knows that their spell is carried by the unmediated resonance of the signs. There is no official, intermediary time for the sign and its decipherment; it is not a matter of believing, doing, wanting, or knowing. Their attraction is foreign to the forms of discourse, as well as the distinctive logic of the utterance and statement. Their spell belongs to the order of declamation and prophecy, a discourse whose symbolic effectiveness requires neither decipherment nor belief.



The immediate attraction of a song, a voice or scent. The attraction of the panther's scent (Détienne: *Dionysos mis à mort*). According to the ancients, the panther is the only animal to emit a fragrant odour, which it uses to capture its victims. The panther has only to hide (his appearance strikes terror), and his victims are bewitched by his scent – an invisible trap to which they come to be caught. But this power of seduction can be turned against the panther: one hunts him by using spices, herbs and perfumes as bait.

But what does it mean to say that the panther seduces by its scent? Why is its scent seductive? (And why is this legend itself seductive? What sort of fragrance does it emit?) What accounts for the seduction of the song of the Sirens, the beauty of a face, the depths of a chasm, or the imminence of a catastrophe – as well as the scent of the panther or a door that opens onto the void? Is it some hidden force of attraction? or a powerful desire? No, these are empty terms. Seduction lies with the annulment of the signs, of their meaning, with their pure appearance. Eyes that seduce have no meaning, their meaning being exhausted in the gaze, as a face with makeup is exhausted in its appearance, in the formal rigour of a senseless labour. *Above all, seduction supposes not a signified desire, but the beauty of an artifice*.

The panther's scent is also a senseless message – and behind this message the panther is invisible, like a woman beneath her makeup. The Sirens too remained unseen. Sorcery is formed by what lies hidden.

The seduction of eyes. The most immediate, purest form of seduction, one that bypasses words. Where looks alone join in a sort of duel, an immediate intertwining, unbeknownst to others and their discourses: the discrete charm of a silent and immobile orgasm. Once the delightful tension of the gazes gives way to words or loving gestures, the intensity declines. A tactility of gazes that sums up the body's full potential (and that of its desires?) in a single, subtle instant, as in a stroke of wit. A duel that is simultaneously sensual, even voluptuous, but disincarnated – a perfect foretaste of seduction's vertigo, which the more carnal pleasures that follow will not equal. That these eyes meet is accidental, but it is as though they had been fixed on each other forever. Devoid of meaning, what is exchanged are not the gazes. There is no desire here, for desire is not captivating, while eyes, like fortuitous appearances, cast a spell composed of pure, duel signs, with neither depth nor temporality.



Any system that is totally complicit in its own absorption, such that signs no longer make sense, will exercise a remarkable power of fascination. Systems fascinate by their esotericism, which preserves them from external logics. The absorption of anything real by something self-sufficient, and self-destructive, proves fascinating. Whether a system of thought, an automatic mechanism, a perfect and perfectly useless object or a desert of stones, a woman or strip-tease artist (who must caress herself in order to "enchant" and exercise her power) – or, to be sure, God that most beautiful piece of esoteric machinery.

Or the woman with makeup, who is absent to herself, an absence of a focussed look, the absence of a face – how can one not be swallowed up in it? A beauty is one who abolishes herself, thereby constituting a challenge that we can only take up by the dazzling loss of what? Of what is not beautiful. The beautiful woman absorbed by the cares that her beauty demands is immediately infectious because, in her narcissistic excess, she is removed from her self, and because all that is removed from the self is plunged into secrecy and absorbs its surroundings.

The attraction of the void lies at the basis of seduction: not

the accumulation of signs, nor the messages of desire, but an esoteric complicity with the absorption of signs. Seduction begins in secrecy, in the slow, brutal exhaustion of meaning which establishes a complicity amongst the signs; it is here, more than in a physical being or the quality of a desire, that seduction is concocted. And it is what accounts for the enchantment of the games's rules.



## THE SECRET AND THE CHALLENGE

The secret.

The seductive, initiatory quality of that which cannot be said because it makes no sense, and of that which is not said even though it gets around. Thus I know another's secret but do not reveal it and he knows that I know, but does not acknowledge it: the intensity between us is simply this secret about the secret. The complicity has nothing to do with some hidden piece of information. Besides, even if we wanted to reveal the secret we could not, since there is nothing to say... Everything that can be revealed lies outside the secret. For the latter is not a hidden signified, nor the key to something, but circulates through and traverses everything that can be said, just as seduction flows beneath the obscenity of speech. It is the opposite of communication, and yet it can be shared. The secret maintains its power only at the price of remaining unspoken, just as seduction operates only because never spoken nor intended.

The hidden or the repressed has a tendency to manifest itself, whereas the secret does not. It is an initiatory and impulsive form: one enters into a secret, but cannot exit. The secret is never revealed, never communicated, never even "secreted" (Zempleny, *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, no. 14). Whence its strength, the power of an allusive, ritual exchange.

Thus in Kierkegaard's *Diary of the Seducer*, seduction takes the form of an enigma to be solved. The girl is an enigma, and in order to seduce her, one must become an enigma for her. It is an *enigmatic duel*, one that the seduction solves, but *without disclosing the secret*. If the secret were disclosed, sexuality would stand revealed. The story's true meaning, if it had one, would be about sex – but in fact it doesn't have one. In that place where meaning should be, where sex should occur, where words point to it, and where others think it to be – there is nothing. And this nothing/secret, this, the seduction's un-signified moves beneath the words and their meaning, and moves faster than their meaning. It is what touches you first, before the sentences arrive, in the time it takes for them to fade away. A seduction beneath discourse, an invisible seduction, moving from sign to sign – a secret circulation.

It is the exact opposite of the psychological relation: to share someone's secrets is not to share his or her phantasies or desires, nor it is to share something as yet unspoken. When the id speaks, it is not seductive. All that involves repression, expressive energies or the unconscious, everything that wishes to speak, everywhere the ego has to appear – all this belongs to an exoteric order that contradicts the esoteric form of secrecy and seduction.

Yet the unconscious, the “adventure” of the unconscious, appears as the last, large-scale attempt to reestablish secrecy in a society without secrets. The unconscious appears as our secret, our personal mystery in a confessional and transparent society. But it isn't really a secret, for it is merely psychological. It does not have an existence of its own, since the unconscious was created at the same time as psychoanalysis, that is to say, at the same time as the procedures for its assimilation, and the techniques for the retraction of the secrets lodged in its deep structures.

But perhaps something is taking its revenge on all the interpretations, and in a subtle way disrupting their development? Something that, most decidedly, does not want to be said and that, being an enigma, enigmatically possesses its own resolution, and so aspires to remain in secret and in the *joys* of secrecy.

Language returns to its secret seduction despite all the efforts

to uncover and betray it in order to make it signify, while we return to our own insoluble pleasures.



There is neither a time of seduction, nor a time for seduction, but still it has its own indispensable rhythm. Unlike instrumental strategies, which proceed by intermediary stages, seduction operates instantaneously, in a single movement, and is always its own end.

The cycle of seduction cannot be stopped. One can seduce someone in order to seduce someone else, but also seduce someone else to please oneself. The illusion that leads from the one to the other is subtle. Is it to seduce, or to be seduced, that is seductive? But to be seduced is the best way to seduce. It is an endless refrain. There is no active or passive mode in seduction, no subject or object, no interior or exterior: seduction plays on both sides, and there is no frontier separating them. One cannot seduce others, if one has not oneself been seduced.

Because seduction never stops at the truth of signs, but operates by deception and secrecy, it inaugurates a mode of circulation that is itself secretive and ritualistic, a sort of immediate initiation that plays by its own rules.

To be seduced is to be turned from one's truth. To seduce is to lead the other from his/her truth. This truth then becomes a secret that escapes him/her (*Vincent Descombes: L'inconscient malgré lui*).

Seduction is immediately reversible, and its reversibility is constituted by the challenge it implies and the secret in which it is absorbed.

It is a power of attraction and distraction, of absorption and fascination, a power that cause the collapse of not just sex, but the real in general – a power of defiance. It is never an economy of sex or speech, but an escalation of violence and grace, an instantaneous passion that can result in sex, but which can just as easily exhaust itself in the process of defiance and death. It implies a radical indetermination that distinguishes it from a drive – drives being indeterminate in relation to their object, but determined as force and origin, while the passion of seduc-

tion has neither substance nor origin. It is not from some libidinal investment, some energy of desire that this passion acquires its intensity, but from gaming as pure form and from purely formal bluffing.



Likewise, the challenge. It too has a duel form that wears itself out in no time at all, drawing its intensity from this instantaneous reversion. It too is bewitching, like a meaningless discourse to which one cannot not respond *for the very reason that it is absurd*. Why does one respond to a challenge? The same mysterious question as: what is it that seduces?

What could be more seductive than a challenge? A seduction or challenge always drives the other mad, but with a vertigo that is reciprocal – an insanity borne by the vertiginous absence that unites them, and by their reciprocal engulfment. Such is the inevitability of the challenge, and why one cannot but respond to it. For it inaugurates a kind of insane relation, quite unlike relations of communication or exchange: a duel relation transacted by meaningless signs, but held together by a fundamental rule and its secret observance. A challenge terminates all contracts and exchanges regulated by the law (whether the law of nature or value), substituting a highly conventional and ritualized pact, with an unceasing obligation to respond and respond in spades – an obligation that is governed by a fundamental game rule, and proceeds in accord with its own rhythm. In contrast to the law, which is always inscribed in stone or the sky, or in one's heart, this fundamental rule never needs to be stated; indeed, *it must never be stated*. It is immediate, immanent, and inevitable (whereas the law is transcendent and explicit).

There can never be seduction or challenge by contract. In order for a challenge or seduction to exist, all contractual relations must disappear before the duel relation – a relation composed of secret signs that have been withdrawn from exchange, and derive their intensity from their formal division and immediate reverberation. In like manner, seduction's enchantment puts an end to all libidinal economies, and every sexual or psy-

chological contract, replacing them with a dizzying spiral of responses and counter-responses. It is never an investment but a risk; never a contract but a pact; never individual but duel; never psychological but ritual; never natural but artificial. It is no one's strategy, but a destiny.



Challenge and seduction are quite similar. And yet there is a difference. In a challenge one draws the other into one's area of strength, which, in view of the potential for unlimited escalation, is also his or her area of strength. Whereas in a strategy (?) of seduction one draws the other into one's area of weakness, which is also his or her area of weakness. A calculated weakness, an incalculable weakness: one challenges the other to be taken in. A weakness or failure: isn't the panther's scent itself a weakness, an abyss which the other animals approach giddily? In fact, the panther of the mythical scent is simply the epicenter of death, and from this weakness subtle fragrances emerge.

To seduce is to appear weak. To seduce is to render weak. We seduce with our weakness, never with strong signs or powers. In seduction we enact this weakness, and this is what gives seduction its strength.

We seduce with our death, our vulnerability, and with the void that haunts us. The secret is to know how to play with death in the absence of a gaze or gesture, in the absence of knowledge or meaning.

Psychoanalysis tells us to assume our fragility and passivity, but in almost religious terms, turns them into a form of resignation and acceptance in order to promote a well tempered psychic equilibrium. Seduction, by contrast, plays triumphantly with weakness, making a game of it, with its own rules.



Everything is seduction and nothing but seduction.  
They wanted us to believe that everything was production.  
The theme song of world transformation: the play of produc-

tive forces is what regulates the course of things. Seduction is merely an immoral, frivolous, superficial, and superfluous process, limited to the realm of signs and appearances, devoted to pleasure and the usufruct of useless bodies. But what if everything, contrary to appearances – in fact, in accord with a secret rule of appearances – operates by seduction?

the moment of seduction  
 the suspension of seduction  
 the risk of seduction  
 the accident of seduction  
 the delirium of seduction  
 the pause of seduction.

Production only accumulates, without deviating from its end. It replaces all illusions with just one, its own, which becomes the reality principle. Production, like revolution, puts an end to the epidemic of appearances. But seduction is inevitable. No one living escapes it – not even the dead. For the dead are only dead when there are no longer any echoes from this world to seduce them, and no longer any rites challenging them to exist.

For us, only those who can no longer produce are dead. In reality, only those who do not wish to seduce or be seduced are dead. But seduction gets hold of them nonetheless, just as it gets hold of all production and ends up destroying it.

For the void – the hole that, at any point, is burned out by the return of the flame of any sign, the meaninglessness that makes for seduction's unexpected charm – also lies in wait, without illusion, for production once the latter has reached its limits. Everything returns to the void, including our words and gestures. But before disappearing, certain words and gestures, by anticipating their demise, are able to exercise a seduction that the others will never know. Seduction's secret lies in this evocation and revocation of the other, with a slowness and suspense that are poetic, like the slow motion film of a fall or an explosion, because something had the time, prior to its completion, to make its absence felt. And this, if there is such a thing, is the perfection of “desire.”



## THE EFFIGY OF THE SEDUCTRESS

The prismatic effect of seduction provides another space of refraction. Seduction does not consist of a simple appearance, nor a pure absence, but the eclipse of a presence. Its sole strategy is to be-there/not-there, and thereby produce a sort of flickering, a hypnotic mechanism that crystallizes attention outside all concern with meaning. Absence here seduces presence.

The sovereign power of the seductress stems from her ability to “eclipse” any will or context. She cannot allow other relations to be established – even the most intimate, affectionate, amorous or sexual (particularly not the latter) – without breaking them, or repaying them with a strange fascination. She constantly avoids all relations in which, at some given moment, the question of *truth* will be posed. She undoes them effortlessly, not by denying or destroying them, but by making them shimmer. Here lies her secret: in the flickering of a presence. She is never where one expects her, and never where one wants her. Seduction supposes, Virilio would say, an “aesthetics of disappearance.”

The seductress turns desire itself into an illusion or trap. For her there is no more truth to desire – or to the body – than to anything else. Love itself, or the sex act, can become moments in a seduction if given the ecliptic form of appearance/dis-

appearance, that it to say, a discontinuous form that cuts short every emotion, pleasure and relation in order to reaffirm the superior character of seduction, its transcendent aesthetics relative to the immanent ethics of pleasure and desire. Love and the carnal act are only so much seductive finery, the most refined and subtle invented by women to seduce men. But modesty and rejection can play the same role. Everything is finery in this sense, and belongs to the genius of appearance.

"I do not want to love, cherish, or even please you, but to *seduce* you – and my only concern is not that you love or please me, but that you are *seduced*." The game of the seductress involves a certain mental cruelty, towards herself as well as others. Any affection on her part is a weakness relative to the ritual imperative. No quarter can be given in a challenge where love and desire are dissolved. Nor any respite, lest this fascination be reduced to nothing. The true seductress can only exist in a state of seduction. Outside this state, she is no longer a woman, neither an object nor subject of desire, faceless and unattractive – for she is borne by an all-consuming passion. Seduction is sovereign – the only ritual that eclipses all others – but its sovereignty is cruel, and carries a heavy price.

Thus, when seducing, her body and desires are no longer her own. But then what is this body, or these desires? She doesn't believe in them – and so plays with them. Without a body of her own, she turns herself into a pure appearance, an artificial construct with which to trap the desires of others. Seduction consists in letting the other believe himself to be the subject of his desire, without oneself being caught in this trap. It can also consist in becoming a "seductive" sex object, if that is the man's "desire." The spell cast by seduction passes through sexual attraction; but indeed, it passes through in order to transcend it. "I am attractive, but you are captivating." – "Life has its attractions, but death leaves one spellbound."

For seduction, desire is not an end but a hypothetical prize. More precisely, the objective is to provoke and deceive desire, which exists only to burn for a moment and then be disappointed – it being deluded as to its power, which is given to it only in order to be withdrawn. The person might not even know what has happened. It might be that the person seducing actu-

ally loves or desires the person seduced, but at a deeper level (or a more superficial level if one will, in the superficial abyss of appearances) another game is being played out, unbeknownst to the two protagonists who remain mere puppets.

For seduction, desire is a myth. If desire is a will to power and possession, seduction places before it an equal will to power by the simulacrum. In forming a web of appearances seduction both sustains this hypothetical power of desire and exorcizes it. Just as for Kierkegaard's seducer the girl's naive grace, her spontaneous erotic power is merely a myth, which is sustained only so that it can be annihilated (perhaps he loves her, but in the suprasensual realm of seduction the girl is but the mythical figure of a sacrifice); similarly, for the seductress, the power of man's desire is a myth that she uses in order to both evoke and destroy it. The seducer's artifice, directed at the girl's mythical grace, is fully equal to the seductress' artificial reworking of her body, which is directed at the man's mythical desire. In both cases the mythical power, whether the power of grace or desire, is to be reduced to nothing. Seduction always seeks to overturn and exorcize a power. If seduction is artifical, it is also sacrificial. One is playing with death, it always being a matter of capturing or immolating the desire of the other.

Seduction, by contrast, is immortal. The seductress, like the hysteric, *wants to be* immortal and live in an eternal present – much to everyone's astonishment, given the field of deception and despair in which she moves, and given the cruelty of her game. But here she survives because outside psychology, meaning or desire. What destroys people, wears them down, is the meaning they give their acts. But the seductress does not attach any meaning to what she does, nor suffer the weight of desire. Even if she speaks of reasons or motives, be they guilty or cynical, it is a trap. And her ultimate trap is to ask: "Tell me who I am" – when she is indifferent to what she is, when she is a blank, with neither age nor history. Her power lies in the irony and elusiveness of her presence. She may be blind to her own existence, but she is well aware of all the mechanisms of reason and truth people use to protect themselves from seduction; and she is aware that from behind the shelter of these mechanisms they will nonetheless, if handled correctly, let them-

selves be seduced.

"I am immortal," in other words, relentless. Which is to say that the game must never stop, this even being one of its fundamental rules. For just as no player can be greater than the game itself, so no seductress can be greater than seduction. None of the vicissitudes of love or desire can be allowed to break this rule. One must love in order to seduce, and not the reverse. Seduction consists of finery, it weaves and unweaves appearances, as Penelope weaved and unweaved her tapestry, as desire itself was woven and unwoven beneath her hands. For it is appearances, and the mastery of appearances, that rule.

No one has ever been dispossessed of the power associated with seduction and its rules, this fundamental form. Yes, women have been dispossessed of their bodies, their desires, happiness and rights. But they have always remained mistresses of this possibility of eclipse, of seductive disappearance and translucence, and so have always been capable of eclipsing the power of their masters.



But is there a feminine figure of seduction or, for that matter, a masculine figure? Or is there but one form, variants of which crystallize around one or the other sex?

Seduction oscillates between two poles, a pole of strategy and a pole of animality (and thus ranges from the most subtle calculation to the most brutal physical suggestion) which we associate with the figures of the seducer and the seductress respectively. But doesn't this division mask a single form, an undivided seduction?



#### Animal seduction.

With animals seduction achieves its purest form, in that the seductive display appears instinctual, immediately given in reflex behaviours and natural finery. But for all that, animal seduction does not cease to be perfectly ritualistic. In this sense, animals are the least natural of beings, for with them artifice

– the effects of masquerade and finery – is at its most naive. It is at the heart of this paradox, where the distinction between nature and culture is suppressed in the concept of *finery*, that the analogy between animality and femininity plays itself out.

If animals are seductive, is it not because they are strategic elements in a campaign to deride our pretensions to humanity? If the feminine is seductive, is it not because it too thwarts our claims to depth? The frivolous has a power of seduction which concurs with that of the bestial.

What we find seductive in animals is not their “natural” savagery. For that matter, are animals really characterized by savagery, by a high degree of contingency, unpredictability, or impulsiveness, or on the contrary by high degrees of ritualized behaviour? The same question can be posed for primitive societies. The latter were once seen as close to the animal realm, and indeed, in a sense, they are: for they share a common disregard for the law, tied to high levels of observance of fixed forms, whether in their relation to their territory, other animals or men.

Even in their dances and bodily ornamentation, their animal grace is a product of a series of observances, rules and analogies, which makes it the opposite of natural chance. All the prestigious attributes associated with animals are ritual traits. The “natural” finery of animals is similar to the artificial finery of humans, who, one might add, have always sought to incorporate the former into their rites. If there is a preference for animal masks, it is because animals immediately appear as ritual masks, as a play of signs and a strategy of finery – as is the case with human rituals. The very morphology of primitive rituals, their furs and feathers, gestures and dances are a prototype of ritual efficacy. That is, they never form a functional system (reproduction, sexuality, ecology, mimicry – the postulates of an extremely impoverished ethology reworked and corrected by functionalism), but an ostentatious ceremony for mastering signs, and a cycle for seducing meaning, where the signs gravitate irresistibly around each other so as to reproduce themselves as if by magnetic recurrence, resulting in dizziness, a loss of meaning, and the sealing of an indestructible pact amongst the participants.

Generally speaking, "rituality" is, as a form, superior to "sociality". The latter is only a recent, and not very seductive form of organization and exchange, one invented by humans for humans. Rituality is a much larger system, encompassing the living and the dead, humans and animals, as well as a "nature" whose periodic movements, recurrences and catastrophes serve, seemingly spontaneously, as ritual signs. By comparison, sociality appears rather impoverished: under the sign of the Law it is capable of bringing together only one species (and even then...). By contrast, rituality succeeds in maintaining – not by laws, but by rules and their infinite play of analogies – a form of cyclical order and universal exchange of which the Law and the social are quite incapable.

If we find animals appealing and seductive, it is because they remind us of this ritual arrangement. They do not evoke a nostalgia for the savage state, but a feline, theatrical nostalgia for finery, for the seduction and strategy of ritual forms which transcend all sociality and which, thereby, still enchant us.

In this sense one can say that, with seduction, one "becomes an animal," or that female seduction is animal-like, without implying some sort of instinctive nature. For one is saying that seduction is profoundly linked to body rituals which, like all other rituals, serve not to establish a nature and uncover its law, but to set up appearances and organize their cycle. Not that female seduction is ethically inferior. On the contrary, it is aesthetically superior. It is a strategy of finery.

Men, moreover, are never seduced by natural beauty, but by an artificial, ritual beauty – because the latter is esoteric and initiatory, whereas the former is merely expressive. And because seduction lies in the aura of secrecy produced by weightless, artificial signs, and not in some natural economy of meaning, beauty or desire.

The claim that anatomy (or the body) is not destiny is not recent, but was made far more stridently in all societies prior to our own. Rituals, ceremonies, raiments, masks, designs, mutilations and torture – all in order to seduce... the gods, the spirits, or the dead. The body was the first great medium of this immense undertaking. For us alone does it take on an aesthetic, decorative character. (With its true character thereby de-

nied: the very idea of decoration implies a moral denial of all the body's magic. For the savages, not to mention animals, it is not decoration, but finery. And a universal rule. He who is not painted is stupid, say the Caduveo).

We might find the forms disgusting: covering the body with mud, deforming the skull or filing the teeth in Mexico, deforming the feet in China, distending the neck, or making incisions in the face, not to mention tattoos, jewelry, masks, fine raiments, ritual paintings; or even the bracelets made from tin cans worn by present-day Polynesians.

The body is made to signify, but with signs that, strictly speaking, have no meaning. All resemblance has vanished, all representation is absent. The body is covered with appearances, illusions, traps, animal parodies and sacrificial simulations, not in order to dissemble, nor to reveal (a desire, say, or a drive), nor even just for fun (the spontaneous expressiveness of children and primitives). What is involved here is an undertaking that Artaud would have termed metaphysical: a sacrificial challenge to the world to exist. For nothing exists naturally, *things exist because challenged, and because summoned to respond to that challenge*. It is by being challenged that the powers of the world, including the gods, are aroused; it is by challenging these powers that they are exorcized, seduced and captured; it is by the challenge that the game and its rules are resurrected. All this requires an artificial bluffing, that it to say, a systematic simulation that troubles itself with neither a preestablished state of the world nor bodily anatomy. A radical metaphysics of simulation, it need not even concern itself with "natural" harmony. In the facial paintings of the Caduveo, the facial features are not respected; the design's diagrams and symmetries being laid across the face from one end to the other. (Our makeup submits to the body as a referential system, in order to accentuate its features and orifices. But does this mean that it is closer to the nature of desire? Nothing could be less certain).



Something of this radical metaphysics of appearances, this

challenge by simulation, still lives in the cosmetic arts and the glamour of modern fashion. The Church Fathers were well aware of this, and denounced it as diabolical. "To be attentive to one's body, to care for and paint it is to set oneself up as a rival of God and contest His creation." This stigmatization has continued ever since, but is now reflected in that other religion, that of the subject's liberty and essential desires. Our entire morality condemns the construction of the female as a sex object by the facial and bodily arts. The female is no longer denounced by God's judgment, but by the dictates of modern ideology, for prostituting her femininity in consumer culture, and subjecting her body to the reproduction of capital. "Femininity is woman's alienated being." "Femininity manifests itself as an abstract totality, devoid of any reality it can call its own, a product of the discourse and rhetoric of advertising." "The woman flushed with her beauty masks and perpetually fresh lips no longer lives her real life," etc., etc.

In opposition to all these pious discourses, we must again praise the sex object; for it bears, in the sophistication of appearances, something of a challenge to the naïve order of the world and sex; and it, and it alone, escapes the realm of production (though one might like to believe it subjected to the latter) and returns to that of seduction. In its unreality, in the unreal defiance of its prostitution of signs, the sexual object moves beyond sex and attains seduction. It again becomes ceremonial. The feminine was always the effigy of this ritual, and there is a frightful confusion in wanting to de-sanctify it as a cult *object* in order to turn it into a *subject* of production, or in wanting to rescue it from artifice in order to return it to its own "natural" desires.

Woman is well within her rights, and is indeed forming a sort of duty, in studying to appear magical and supernatural. It is necessary that she should astonish and bewitch. Being an idol, she must be gilded and adored. She must therefore borrow from all the arts the means of raising herself above nature, the better to subjugate hearts and stir souls. It matters very little that her tricks and

artifices should be known to all, provided that their success is certain and their effect always irresistible. Such considerations provide the artist-philosopher with a ready justification for all the practices employed by women of every period to lend substance and, so to speak, divinity to their fragile beauty.

An enumeration of these practices would be interminable. But to confine ourselves to what our contemporaries vulgarly call "the use of cosmetics," who can fail to see that the use of rice-powder (so stupidly anathematised by our candid philosophers) has the object and result of banishing from the complexion the blemishes which nature has outrageously sown there, and of creating an abstract unity in the texture and colour of the skin; and that this unity, like the unity produced by the sculptor's chisel, brings the human being directly nearer to the statue – in other words, to a being that is divine and superior? As for the lamp-black that outlines the eye, and the rouge that emphasizes the upper part of the cheek, the planned result of these – although their use arises from the same principle, the need to transcend nature – is to satisfy an exactly opposite need. The red and the black represent life – a life surpassing and exceeding that of the nature. The black frame around the eye makes the glance stranger and more penetrating; it makes the eye more distinctly resemble a window open on the infinite. The red blaze on the cheek further enhances the brightness of the eye, and lends a woman's lovely face the mysterious passion of a priestess.

Charles Baudelaire, "In Praise of Cosmetics"<sup>2</sup>

If desire exists – as modernity hypothesizes – then nothing must interfere with its natural harmony, and cosmetics are hypocritical. But if desire is a myth – as seduction hypothe-

2. Charles Baudelaire, "In Praise of Cosmetics" in *My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose Writings* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1951) pp. 63-64.

sizes – then nothing can prevent it from being put to use by signs, unrestrained by natural limits. The power of signs lies in their appearance and disappearance; that is how they efface the world. Cosmetics too are a means of effacing the face, effacing the eyes behind more beautiful eyes, cancelling the lips behind more luxuriant lips. This “abstract unity that brings the human being nearer to a being that is divine,” this “life surpassing and exceeding nature” about which Baudelaire speaks, results from a simple artificial stroke that suppresses all expression. Artifice does not alienate the subject, but mysteriously alters her/him. Women are aware of this transformation when, in front of their mirrors, they must erase themselves in order to apply their makeup, and when, by applying their makeup, they make themselves into a pure appearance denuded of meaning. How can one mistake this “exceeding of nature” for a vulgar camouflaging of truth? Only falsehoods can alienate the truth, but makeup is not false, or else (like the game of transvestites) it is falser than falsehood and so recovers a kind of superior innocence or transparency. It absorbs all expression within its own surface, without a trace of blood or meaning. Certainly this is challenging, and cruel – but who is alienated? Only those who cannot abide this cruel perfection, and cannot defend themselves except by moral repulsion – and they are wrong. How can one respond to pure appearances, whether hieratic or mobile, without first recognizing their sovereignty? By taking off the makeup, tearing off the veil, or enjoining the appearances to disappear? How ridiculous! An iconoclast’s utopia. There is no God behind the images, and the very nothingness they conceal must remain a secret. The seduction, fascination and “aesthetic” attraction of all the great imaginary processes lies here: in the effacing of every instance, be it the face and every substance, be it desire – in the artificial perfection of the sign.



Undoubtedly, the best example of this is to be found in the only important constellation of collective seduction produced by modern times, that of film stars or cinema idols. Now the

star, even if a man, is feminine; for if God is masculine, idols are always feminine. And in truth, the biggest stars were women. They were, however, no longer beings of flesh and desire, but transexual, suprasensual beings, around whom crystallized stern rituals and a wasteful profusion which turned them into a generation of sacred monsters, endowed with a power of absorption equal to and rivaling the real world's powers of production. They were our only myth in an age incapable of generating great myths or figures of seduction comparable to those of mythology or art.

The cinema's power lives in its myth. Its stories, its psychological portraits, its imagination or realism, the meaningful impressions it leaves – these are all secondary. Only the myth is powerful, and at the heart of the cinematographic myth lies seduction – that of the renowned seductive figure, a man or woman (but above all a woman) linked to the ravishing but specious power of the cinematographic image itself. A miraculous conjunction.

The star is by no means an ideal or sublime being: she is artificial. She need not be an actress in the psychological sense; her face is not the reflection of a soul or sensitivity which she does not have. On the contrary, her presence serves to submerge all sensibility and expression beneath a ritual fascination with the void, beneath the ecstasy of her gaze and the nullity of her smile. This is how she achieves mythical status and becomes subject to collective rites of sacrificial adulation.

The ascension of the cinema idols, the masses' divinities, was and remains a central story of modern times – it still counterbalances all political or social events. There is no point in dismissing it as merely the dreams of mystified masses. It is a seductive occurrence that counterbalances every productive occurrence.

To be sure, seduction in the age of the masses is no longer like that of *The Princess of Cleves*, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* or *Diary of the Seducer*, nor for that matter, like that found in ancient mythology, which undoubtedly contains the stories richest in seduction. In these seduction is *hot*, while that of our modern idols is *cold*, being at the intersection of two cold mediums, that of the image and that of the masses.

This latter seduction has the spectral whiteness of the heavenly stars, after which they are so appropriately named. The masses have been “seduced” in the modern era by only two great events: the white light of the stars, and the black light of terrorism. These two phenomena have much in common. Terrorist acts, like the stars, “flicker;” they do not enlighten; they do not radiate a continuous, white light, but an intermittent, cold light; they disappoint even as they exalt; they fascinate by the suddenness of their appearance and the imminence of their disappearance. And they are constantly being eclipsed as they each try to outdo each other.

The great stars or seductresses never dazzle because of their talent or intelligence, but because of their absence. They are dazzling in their nullity, and in their coldness – the coldness of makeup and ritual hieraticism (rituals are cool, according to McLuhan). They turn into a metaphor the immense glacial process which has seized hold of our universe of meaning, with its flickering networks of signs and images; but at the same time, at a specific historical conjuncture that can no longer be reproduced, they transform it into an effect of seduction.

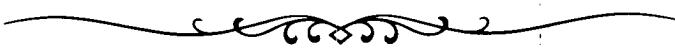
The cinema has never shone except by pure seduction, by the pure vibrancy of non-sense – a hot shimmering that is all the more beautiful for having come from the cold.

Artifice and non-sense, they are the idol’s esoteric face, its mask of initiation. The seduction of a face purged of all expression, except that of the ritual smile and a no less conventional beauty. A white face, with the whiteness of signs consecrated to ritualized appearances, no longer subject to some deep law of signification. The sterility of idols is well-known: they do not reproduce, but rise from the ashes, like the phoenix, or from their mirror, like the seductress.

These great seductive effigies are our masks, our Easter Island statues. But do not be mistaken: if once, historically, there were throngs hot with adoration, religious passion, sacrifice and insurrection, now there are masses cold with seduction and fascination. Their effigy is cinematographic and implies a different sacrifice.

The death of the stars is merely punishment for their ritualized idolatry. They must die, they must already be dead – so

that they can be perfect and superficial, with or without their makeup. But their death must not lead us to a negative abreaction. For behind the only existing form of immortality, that of artifice, there lies the idea incarnated in the stars, that *death itself shines by its absence*, that death can be turned into a brilliant and superficial appearance, that it is itself a seductive surface...



## THE IRONIC STRATEGY OF THE SEDUCER

If it is characteristic of the seductress that she turns herself into an appearance in order to disturb appearances, what is characteristic of that other figure, the seducer?

He too turns himself into an illusion in order to sow confusion, but curiously, this illusion is part of a calculation, with finery giving way to strategy. Now if a woman's finery is also strategic, a calculated display, is not the seducer's strategy a display of calculation with which to defend himself from some opposing force? A strategy of finery vs. the finery of strategy...

Discourses that are too sure of themselves – as with strategies of love – must be understood differently. Though completely “rational,” they are still only the instruments of a larger *fate*, of which they are as much the victims as the directors. Doesn't the seducer end up losing himself in his strategy, as in an emotional labyrinth? Doesn't he invent that strategy in order to lose himself in it? And he who believes himself the game's master, isn't he the first victim of strategy's tragic myth?



Consider the seducer's obsession with the girl in Kierkegaard's *Diary of the Seducer*. An obsession with an inviolate, still asexual state, a charmed state of grace. And because she is graced, one must find grace in her eyes, for like God she possesses a

matchless vantage. As a result, because *naturally endowed with all seduction*, she becomes the object of a savage challenge and must be destroyed.

The seducer's calling is the extermination of the girl's natural power by an artificial power of his own. He will deliberately undertake to equal or surpass the natural power to which, in spite of all that makes him appear as the seducer, he has succumbed since the beginning. His strategy, his intention and *destination* are a response to the young girl's grace and seductiveness, to a *predestination* that is all the more powerful because unconscious, and that must, as a result, be exorcized.

The last word cannot be left to nature: this, fundamentally, is what is at issue. Her exceptional, innate grace (which, like the accursed share, is immoral) must be sacrificed by the seducer, who will seek with all his skill to lead her to the point of erotic abandon, the point at which she will cease to be a seductive, that is, dangerous power.

The seducer by himself is nothing; the seduction originates entirely with the girl. This is why Johannes can claim to have learned everything from Cordelia. He is not being hypocritical. The calculated seduction mirrors the natural seduction, drawing from the latter as from its source, but all the better to eliminate it.

This is also why he does not leave anything to chance, the girl being deprived of initiative, a seemingly defenseless object in the game of seduction. She has already played her hand *before* the seducer begins to play his. Everything has already taken place; the seduction simply rights a natural imbalance by taking up the pre-existing challenge constituted by the girl's natural beauty and grace.

Seduction now changes its meaning. Instead of being an immoral and libertine exercise, a cynical deception for sexual ends (and thus without great interest), it becomes mythical and acquires the dimensions of a sacrifice. This is why the "victim's" consent is so easily obtained. In her abandon she is, in a sense, obeying the commands of a divinity who wants *every force to be overturned and sacrificed*, be it that of power or that of a natural seductiveness, because all force, and that of beauty in particular, is sacrilegious. Cordelia is sovereign, and is

sacrificed to her own sovereignty. The reversibility of sacrifice constitutes a murderous form of symbolic exchange; it spares nothing, not even life itself, nor even beauty or seduction, which is its most dangerous form. In this sense, the seducer cannot claim to be the hero of an erotic master plan; he is only the agent of a process that goes far beyond him. Nor is the victim entirely innocent, since, as a beautiful and seductive virgin, she is in herself a challenge which can only be met by her death (or her seduction, the equivalent of her murder).

The *Diary of the Seducer* is the script of a perfect crime. None of the seducer's calculations, none of his manoeuvres fail. It all unfolds with an infallibility that is neither real nor psychological, but mythical. The artifice's perfection, the apparent inevitability that guides the seducer's actions, simply reflects, as in a mirror, the perfection of the girl's innate grace, and the inexorable necessity of her sacrifice. This doesn't result from any specific person's strategy. It is fate, Johannes being only its instrument and, therefore, infallible.

There is something impersonal in every process of seduction, as in every crime, something ritualistic, something supra-subjective and supra-sensual, the lived experience, whether of the seducer or his victim, being only its unconscious reflection. Dramaturgy without a subject. The ritual execution of a form that consumes its subjects. This is why the piece takes on both the aesthetic form of a work of art and the ritual form of a crime.



In the end, Cordelia is seduced, delivered to the erotic pleasures of a night and then abandoned. One mustn't be surprised at this, nor consider Johannes, in line with bourgeois psychology, a hateful person. Seduction, being a sacrificial process, ends with a murder (the deflowering) – though the latter need not have taken place. For once Johannes is certain of his victory, Cordelia is, for him, dead. It is the impure seduction that ends in love and pleasure, and is, therefore, no longer a sacrifice. Sexuality might be reexamined in this light, as the *economic residue* of seduction's sacrificial process, not unlike the residual portion that in ancient sacrifices was left to circulate within the

economy. Sex then would be merely the discount or balance of a more fundamental process, a crime or sacrifice, which fails to attain total reversibility. The gods take their part; humans share what's left.

The impure seducer, a Don Juan or Casanova, dedicates himself to the accumulation of this residue. Flying from one sexual conquest to another, he seduces for pleasure without attaining what Kierkegaard considered the "spiritual" dimension of seduction – where the challenge pushes the woman's seductive resources and powers to their limit, so that, in accord with a carefully laid plan, they can be turned against themselves.

The intrigue whereby Cordelia is slowly dispossessed of her powers, makes one think of the innumerable rites for the exorcism of female powers which can be found throughout primitive societies (Bettelheim). To cast out women's power of fertility, to encircle and circumscribe that power, and eventually simulate and appropriate it, is the purpose of the couvades, the artificial invaginations, excoriations and scarrings – all the innumerable symbolic wounds (up to and including the initiation and institution of a new power: political power) for suppressing the females' incomparable "natural" advantage. One might also consider ancient Chinese ideas on sexuality, according to which the male, by maintaining the orgasm in suspense, draws into himself the power of the female yang.

In any case, something has been given to women that must be exorcized by a deliberate campaign to dispossess her of her powers. And from this "sacrificial" perspective, there is no difference between feminine seduction and the seducer's strategy: they both involve the other's death and mental spoliation, the other's abduction and the abduction of his or her power. It is always the story of a murder, or better of an aesthetic and sacrificial immolation since, as Kierkegaard suggests, it always occurs at a spiritual level.



Concerning the "spiritual" pleasure of seduction.

The scenario of seduction is, according to Kierkegaard, spiritual. It demands a certain *spirit* in the eighteenth century

sense, that is to say, intelligence, charm and refinement, but also in the modern sense of the *Witz* or stroke of wit.

Seduction never plays on the other's desires or amorous proclivities, this being vulgar, carnal, mechanical and, in short, uninteresting. Everything must respond by subtle allusions, *with all the signs enmeshed in the trap*. Thus the seducer's artifices reflect the girl's seductive nature, as though the latter was part of an ironic stage production, a deception made to measure, to which she would, effortlessly, come and be caught.

It is not, therefore, a matter of a frontal attack, but of a diagonal seduction that glides like a (brush?) stroke (and what is more seductive than a stroke of wit?), with its vivacity and economy, and its use of the same duplicated materials, to use Freud's terms. The seducer's weapons are the same as those of the girl, but turned against her; and it is this reversibility that gives the strategy its spiritual appeal.

It has been said, and justifiably so, that mirrors are spiritual – the reflection itself being a stroke of wit. For the mirror's spell does not lie with the fact that one recognizes oneself in it – in itself a rather appalling coincidence – but with the ironic and mysterious stroke of such a reduplication. Now the seducer's strategy is precisely that of the mirror. That is why, ultimately, he doesn't deceive anyone, and why he never deceives himself: for the mirror is infallible (if his manoeuvres and snares were taken from outside, he would undoubtedly commit some error).



Consider another stroke of this type, worthy of being included in the annals of seduction: the same letter written by two different women – and written not out of perversity, but from a transparency of heart and soul. Both letters contain the same amorous emotions, these emotions are real, they each have their own quality. But the latter must not be confused with the "spiritual" pleasure that emanates from the mirror effect produced by the two letters, and between the two women, which is, strictly speaking, a pleasure of seduction. It is an entirely different, livelier, more subtle rapture than love. The emotions born of

desire can never equal the exuberant, secret joy one experiences when playing with desire itself. Desire is simply a referent like any other, which seduction immediately betters and transcends, precisely by virtue of its *spirit*. Seduction is a *stroke*: here it short-circuits the two recipients in a kind of imaginary overprinting, wherein desire perhaps confuses them. At any rate, this stroke confuses desire, renders it indistinct, producing a slight giddiness that proceeds from a superior indifference, and from the laughter that undermines its still too serious entanglement.

To seduce, then, is to make both the figures and the signs – the latter held by their own illusions – play amongst themselves. Seduction is never the result of physical attraction, a conjunction of affects or an economy of desire. For seduction to occur an illusion must intervene and mix up the images; a stroke has to bring disconnected things together, as if in a dream, or suddenly disconnect undivided things. Thus the second woman is irresistibly tempted to rewrite the first letter, as if a temptation could function autonomously and ironically, as if the very *idea* could be seductive. A game without end, in which the signs participate spontaneously, as if from a continuous sense of irony. Perhaps the signs *want* to be seduced, perhaps they desire, more profoundly than men, to seduce and be seduced.



Perhaps signs are not destined to enter into fixed oppositions for meaningful ends, that being only their present *destination*. Their actual *destiny* is perhaps quite different: to seduce each other and, thereby, seduce us. If such is the case, an entirely different logic would lie behind their secret circulation.

Can one imagine a theory that would treat signs in terms of their seductive attraction, rather than their contrasts and oppositions? Which would break with the specular nature of the sign and the encumbrance of the referent? An in which the terms would play amongst themselves within the framework of an enigmatic duel and an inexorable reversibility?

Suppose that all the major, diacritical oppositions with which we order our world were traversed by seduction, instead of being based on contrasts and oppositions. Suppose not just that

the feminine seduces the masculine, but that absence seduces presence, cold seduces hot, the subject seduces the object, and to be sure, the reverse. For seduction supposes that minimum reversibility which puts an end to every fixed opposition and, therefore, every conventional semiology. Towards an inverted semiology?

One might imagine (but why imagine it, when it occurred in ancient Greece) that gods and mortals, instead of being separated by the moral abyss of religion, sought to seduce each other and, indeed, maintained no other relations but those of seduction. Moreover, perhaps all the major distinctions we use to decipher the world and confine it within its prison of meaning, those between, for example, good and evil, or true and false – all the terms that have been so carefully distinguished at such enormous costs of energy – have not always succeeded. The real catastrophes, the real revolutions always consist in the implosion of one of these two-term systems. A universe, or fragment of the universe, then comes to an end – though usually this implosion occurs slowly, the terms being gradually worn down. At present we are witnessing the slow and simultaneous erosion of all the polar structures, and the movement towards a universe that is losing the very dimension of meaning. Disinvested, disenchanted, and disaffected – the end of the world as will and representation.

But this neutralization is not seductive. Seduction pushes the terms towards each other, and unites them at a point of maximum energy and charm; it does not blur them together in a state of minimum intensity.

Now suppose that wherever relations of opposition presently exist, relations of seduction are put into play. Imagine a flash of seduction that causes the polar or differential, transistorized circuits of meaning to melt? There are examples of a non-diacritical semiology (that is to say, a non-semiology). The elements of the ancient cosmogony, for example, did not enter into structural relations of classification (water/fire, air/earth, etc.); they were not “distinctive” elements, but “attractive” elements that seduced each other: water seduces fire, water seduced by fire.

Such seduction is still quite strong in the duel relations of

non-individualized castes and hierarchies, and in the analogical systems that preceded our logical systems of differentiation. And no doubt logical sequences of meaning are still worked over by analogical sequences of seduction – like an immense flash of inspiration that, at a single stroke, brings opposites together. Beneath meaning lies the secret circulation of seductive analogies.

We are not, however, dealing with a new version of universal attraction. The diagonals or transversals of seduction may well break the oppositions between terms; they do not lead to fused or con-fused relations (that's mysticism) but to dual relations. It is not a matter of a mystical fusion of subject or object, or signifier and signified, masculine and feminine, etc., but of a seduction, that is, a *duel and agonistic* relation.



A mirror hangs on the opposite wall  
 she does not reflect on it  
 but the mirror reflects her

*Diary of the Seducer*<sup>3</sup>

The seducer's strategm will be to merge with the mirror on the opposite wall in which the girl is reflected. She does not give it a thought, but the mirror is reflecting on her.

One should distrust the humility of mirrors. The humble servants of appearances, they can reflect only the objects that face them, without being able to conceal themselves. The whole world is grateful to them (except in death when, for this reason, one veils them); they are the watchdogs of appearance. But their faithfulness is specious, for they are waiting for someone to catch himself in their reflection. One does not easily forget their sidelong gaze. They recognize you, and when they surprise you when you least expect it, your time has come.

Such is the seducer's strategy: he gives himself the humility of the mirror, but a skilful mirror, like Perseus' shield, in which

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3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Diary of the Seducer*, appended to *Either/Or* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) p. 311.

Medusa found herself petrified. The girl too is going to fall captive to the mirror that reflects and analyzes her without her knowledge.

He who does not know how to compass a girl about so that she loses sight of everything which he does not wish her to see, he who does not know how to poetize himself in a girl's feeling so that it is from her that everything issues as he wishes it, he is and remains a bungler; I do not begrudge him his enjoyment. A bungler he is and remains, a seducer, something one can by no means call me. I am an aesthete, an eroticist, one who has understood the nature and meaning of love, who believes in love and knows it from the ground up... I know, too, that the highest conceivable enjoyment lies in being loved... To poetize oneself into a young girl is an art, to poetize oneself out of her is a masterpiece. (pp. 363-64)

Seduction is never linear, and does not wear a mask (that is vulgar seduction) – it is *oblique*.

...what weapon is so sharp, so penetrating, so flashing in action, and hence so deceptive, as the eye? You feint a high quart, as fencers say, and attack in second... The moment of the feint is indescribable. The opponent, as it were, feels the slash, he is touched! Aye, that is true, but in quite a different place from where he thought. (p. 314)

I do not meet her, I touch only the periphery of her existence I prefer to arrive a little early and then to meet her, if possible, at the door or upon the steps as she is coming and I am leaving, when I pass her by indifferently. This is the first net in which she must be entangled. I never stop her on the street; I may bow to her, but I never come close to her, but always keep my distance. Our continu-

al encounters are certainly noticeable to her; she does indeed perceive that a new body has appeared on her horizon whose orbit in a strangely imperturbable manner affects her own disturbingly, but she has no conception of the law governing this movement; she is rather inclined to look about to see if she can discover the point controlling it, but she is as ignorant of being herself this focus as if she were a Chinaman. (pp. 336-37)

There is another type of indirect reverberation: hypnosis, a sort of psychic mirror in which, once again, the girl is reflected without her awareness, under someone else's gaze:

Today my eyes have for the first time rested upon her. Someone has said that sleep can make the eyelids so heavy that they close of themselves; perhaps my glance has a similar effect upon Cordelia. Her eyes close, and yet an obscure force stirs within her. She does not see that I am looking at her, she feels it, feels it through her whole body. Her eyes close, and it is night; but within her it is luminous day. (pp. 360-61)

This obliquity of seduction is not duplicity. Where a linear movement knocks against the wall of consciousness and acquires only meager gains, seduction has the obliquity of a dream element or stroke of wit, and as such traverses the psychic universe and its different levels in a single diagonal, in order to touch, at the far end, the unknown blind spot, the secret that lies sealed, the enigma that constitutes the girl, even to herself.

Seduction has two simultaneous moments, or two instants of a single moment. Her entire character, all her feminine resources must be mobilized, and simultaneously suspended. It is not a question of surprising her in the passivity of her innocence; her freedom of action must be in play. Because it is by this freedom, by its movement – and by the curves and sudden twists imparted to it by seduction – that she must, seemingly spontaneously, reach that point where, unbeknownst to

herself, she will be lost. Seduction engages a fate; and in order for it to be realized, she must be completely free, but in her freedom she must reach out, as if somnambulistically, towards her own fall. The girl must be plunged into this second state which reduplicates the first, the state of grace and sovereignty. And this second, somnambulistic state must be sustained, so that a passion, once awakened and intoxicated with itself, slips into the trap fate has set for it. "Her eyes close, and it is night, but within her it is luminous day."

Omissions, denials, deflections, deceptions, diversions and humility – all aimed at provoking this second state, the secret of true seduction. Vulgar seduction might proceed by persistence, but true seduction proceeds by absence; or better it invents a kind of curved space, where the signs are deflected from their trajectory and returned to their source. This state of suspense is essential: it is the moment of the girl's disarray before what awaits her, even as she knows – and this is something new and already fatal – that something awaits her. A moment of high intensity, a "spiritual" moment (in Kierkegaard's sense), similar to that in games of chance between the throw and the moment when the dice stop rolling.

Thus the first time he hears her give out her address, he refuses to remember it:

I will not listen to it, for I do not wish to deprive myself of surprise; I shall certainly meet her again in life, I shall recognize her, and perhaps she will recognize me... If she does not recognize me, if her glance does not immediately convince me of that, then I shall surely find an opportunity to look at her from the side. I promise that she will remember the situation. No impatience, no greediness, everything should be enjoyed in leisurely draughts; she is marked out, she shall be run down. (p. 312)

The seducer is playing *with himself*. At this point it is not even a ruse, with the seducer being the one delighted at the seduction's deferment. This, the pleasure of the approach, should not be slighted; for it is in this interval that he begins

to dig the pit into which she will fall. It is like fencing: one needs a field for the feint. Throughout this period, the seducer, far from seeking to close in on her, seeks to maintain his distance by various ploys: he does not speak directly to her but only to her aunt, and then about trivial or stupid subjects; he neutralizes everything by irony and feigned pedanticism; he fails to respond to any feminine or erotic movement, and even finds her a sitcom suitor to disenchant her of her love. To keep one's distance, to put her off, to disenchant and deceive her, to the point where she herself takes the initiative and breaks off her engagement, thus completing the seduction and creating the ideal situation for her total abandon.

The seducer knows how to let the signs hang. He knows that they are favourable only when left suspended, and will move of themselves towards their appointed destiny. He does not use the signs up all at once, but waits for the moment when they will all respond, one after the other, creating an entirely unique conjuncture of giddiness and collapse.

When she is in the company of the three Jansens she talks very little, their chatter evidently bores her, and certainly the smile on her lips seems to indicate it. *I am relying on that smile.*

Today I went to Mrs. Jansen's. I half opened the door without knocking... She sat alone at the piano... I might have rushed in, seized the moment – that would have been foolish. ...She is evidently concealing the fact that she plays... When sometime I can talk more confidentially with her, I shall slyly lead her to this point and let her fall into the trap. (pp. 338-9).

He has not reached the vulgar diversions, the bits of libertine bravura, the erotic whims (which will occupy an increasingly large part of the story, with Cordelia hardly ever appearing except beneath a lively, libertine imagination: "To love one alone is too little; to love them all suggests the lightness of a superficial character; but to love as many as possible... What pleasure! What a life!") He has not acceded to the frivolous seduction

which is not part of the "grand game" of seduction, with its philosophy of obliquity and diversion. The "grand" seduction may make its way secretly along the same paths as vile seduction, but will play them as suspense or parody. Confusion is not possible: the one is a game of love, the other a spiritual duel. All the interludes only accentuate the slow, calculated, and inevitable rhythm of "high" seduction. The mirror still hangs on the opposite wall, even if we are no longer aware of it – and time in Cordelia's heart is on the march.

The process seems to reach its lowest point with the seducer's betrothal. Here one has the impression of having attained a point of extreme numbness, where the seducer pushes the subterfuge of disenchantment or dissuasion to an almost perverse degree of mortification. And one has the impression that, as a result, Cordelia's spirit is broken, her femininity run down, neutralized by the illusions that surround her. The moment of the engagement – which "has so much importance for a young girl that her entire soul can be fixed on it, like that of a dying man on his last will" – this moment, Cordelia will live without understanding, deprived of every reaction, muzzled, circumvented.

One word, and she would have laughed at me, one word, and she would have been moved, one word, and she would have fled from me; but no word crossed my lips, I remained stolidly serious, and kept exactly to the ritual. As regards my engagement, I do not boast that it is poetic, it is in every way philistine and bourgeois. So now I am engaged; so is Cordelia (so is Cordelia!) and that is all she knows about the whole matter. (pp. 370-71)

It is all a kind of ordeal, as found in initiation rites. The initiated must pass through a phase that marks his or her death, not as pathetic suffering, but as nothingness, as emptiness – the final moment before the passion's illumination and the erotic abandon. In a sense, the seducer adds an ascetic moment to the aesthetic movement he imparts to the whole.

Generally I can assure any girl who entrusts herself to me a perfect aesthetic conduct: only it ends with her being deceived... (p. 375)

There is a sort of humour in the fact that the engagement coincides with the apparent disappearance of all that was at stake in the seduction. What in the bourgeois vision of the nineteenth century constitutes a joyous prelude to marriage, is here an austere initiation into the sublime ends of passion (which are, simultaneously, the calculated ends of seduction) by the somnabulist passage across the deserts of betrothal. (Don't forget that the engagement was a crucial moment in the life of many a romantic, including Kierkegaard, but also and more dramatically of Kleist, Hölderlin, Novalis and Kafka. A painful moment of seemingly endless frustration, the almost mystical passion sustained by the engagement was perhaps (let us drop all talk of sexual impotence!) a matter of suspension, of a suspended enchantment, haunted by the fear of sexual or matrimonial disenchantment.)

However, Johannes continues to live the invisible dance of seduction, even as his objective and its presence appear to have faded. Indeed, he will never live it more intensely, for it is here, in the nullity, in the absence, in the mirror's face that its triumph is assured: she cannot but break off her former engagement and throw herself into his arms. All the fire of her passion lies revealed, just beneath the surface, in its transparence. He will never again find it as beautiful as in this premonition, for at this moment the girl still remains predestined – which will no longer be the case once this moment is over.

Now the giddiness of seduction, as of every passion, lies above all with its predestination. The latter alone provides that fatal quality at the basis of all pleasure – that stroke of wit, as it were, which ties, as if *in advance*, a movement of the soul to its destiny and its death. Here lies the seducer's triumph. And here, in the invisible dance of the betrothal, one is able to see his knowledge of seduction, of true seduction, as a spiritual economy.

My relation to her is that of an unseen partner in

a dance which is danced by only one, when it should really be danced by two. She moves as in a dream, and yet she dances with another, and this other is myself, who, in so far as I am visibly present, am invisible, in so far I am invisible, am visible. The movements of the dance require a partner, she bows to him, she takes his hand, she flees, she draws near him again. I take her hand, I complete her thought as if it were completed in herself. She moves to the inner melody of her own soul; I am only the occasion for her movement. *I am not amorous*, that would only awaken her; *I am easy, yielding, impersonal, almost like a mood.* (p. 376)

Thus seduction is presented in a single movement as:

- a conspiracy of power: a sacrificial form.
- a murder and, ultimately, a perfect crime.
- a work of art: "Seduction considered as one of the Beaux-Arts" (like murder, to be sure).
- a stroke of wit or flash of inspiration: a "spiritual" economy. With the same duel complity as a stroke of wit, where everything is exchanged allusively, without being spelled out, the equivalent of the allusive, ceremonial exchange of a secret.
- an ascetic form of a spiritual, but also pedagogical ordeal: a sort of school of passion, a simultaneously erotic and ironic maieutics.

I shall always acknowledge that a young girl is a born teacher, from whom one can always learn, if nothing else, how to deceive her – for one only learns this best from the girls themselves... (pp. 382-83)

Every young girl is, in relation to the labyrinth of her heart, an Ariadne; she holds the thread by which one finds his way through it, but she has it, without herself knowing how to use it. (p. 396)

– a form of duel or war, an agonal form. It never takes the form of violence or a relation of force, but of a war game. In it one discovers the two simultaneous movements of seduction, as found in every strategy:

So now the first war with Cordelia begins, in which I flee, and thereby teach her to triumph in pursuing me. I constantly retreat before her, and in this retreat, I teach her through myself to know all the power of love, its unquiet thoughts, its passion, what longing is, and hope, and impatient expectation... She will gain courage to believe in love... She must never suspect that she owes this freedom to me... When she at last feels free, so free that she is almost tempted to break with me, then the second war begins. Now she has power and passion, and the struggle becomes worthwhile to me.

Let her forsake me, the second war is just beginning... The first war was a war of liberation, it was only a game; the second is a war of conquest, it is for life and death. (pp. 379-80)

The stakes are all organized around the girl as mythical figure. Both adversary and objective in this many-sided duel, she is, therefore, neither a sex object nor a figure of the Eternal Feminine – the two great, Western references to woman are equally foreign to seduction. And there is no more an ideal victim or ideal subject (the girl and her seducer respectively), than there is an executioner and victim in a sacrifice. The fascination she exercises is that of a mythical figure, an enigmatic partner, a protagonist equal to the seducer in this almost liturgical realm of challenge and duel.



How different from *Les Liaisons Dangereuses!* In Laclos the woman to be seduced appears as a stronghold to be taken, in the manner of the military strategy of the period – the strategy

may be less static than before, but the objective remains the same, her surrender. The Présidente is a fortress to be besieged, and she must fall. There is no seduction here – only siegcraft.

Where there is seduction is not in the relation between seducer and victim, but in that between the seducers, de Valmont and Merteuil, who share a criminal conspiracy by interposed victims. Similarly in the Marquis de Sade, there is only the secret society glorifying in its crimes, while the victims are nullities.

There is none of the subtle art of the turnaround which already appears in Sun-Tseu's *Art of War*, or in zen philosophy and the oriental martial arts. Or as here, in seduction, where the girl, her passion and liberty, are very much a part of the strategy's unfolding. "She was an enigma that, enigmatically, possessed in her its own resolution."



In this duel, everything turns on the movement from ethics to aesthetics, from a *naïve* to a *conscious passion*:

So far I should call her passion a naïve passion. When the change comes, and I begin to draw back in earnest then she will really muster all her resources in order to captivate me. She has no way to accomplish this except by means of the erotic, but this will now appear on a very different scale. It then becomes the weapon in her hand which she swings against me. Then I have the reflected passion. She fights for her own sake because she knows that I possess the erotic; she fights for her own sake in order to overcome me. She develops in herself a higher form of the erotic. What I taught her to suspect by inflaming her, my coldness now teaches her to understand, but in such a way that she believes she discovered it herself. Through this she will try to take me by surprise; she will believe that her boldness has outstripped me, and that she has thereby caught me. Then her passion

becomes definite, energetic, conclusive, logical; her kiss total, her embrace firm. (p. 406)

The ethics is formed of simplicity and naturalness (including the simplicity of desire), of which the girl's naive grace and spontaneity are a part. The aesthetics is formed of artifice, the play of signs – it is seduction. Every ethics must resolve itself into an aesthetics. For Kierkegaard's seducer, as for Schiller, Hölderlin, or even Marcuse, the passage to aesthetics is the highest movement granted the human species. But the seducer's aesthetics is quite different: it is not divine and transcendent, but ironic and diabolical; it does not have the form of an ideal, but of a stroke of wit; it does not go beyond ethics; it is deflection, inflection, seduction, and transfiguration, as realized by the mirror of deception. This, however, is not to say that the seducer's strategy is perverse; it is a part of that aesthetics of irony which seeks to transform a vulgar, physical eroticism into a passion, and stroke of wit.

I have noticed that she always calls me *mine* when she writes to me; but she lacks the courage to say it to me. Today I begged her to do it, with all the insinuating and erotic warmth possible. She started to do so; an ironic glance, indescribably swift and brief, was enough to make it impossible for her, although my lips urged her with all their might. *This mood is entirely normal.* (p. 419)

Eerotically she is completely equipped for the struggle, she fights with the darts of her eyes, with the command of her brows, with the secretiveness of her forehead, with the eloquence of her bosom, with the dangerous allurement of the embrace, with the prayer of her lips, with the smile on her face, with all the sweet longing of her entire being. There is a power in her, an energy, as if she were a valkyrie; but this erotic force is in turn tempered by a certain languishing weakness which is breathed out over her. — *She must not be held too long at this peak...* (p. 419)

Irony always prevents the mortal emotional demonstrations that anticipate the game's end and threaten to cut short the untried possibilities held by each of the players. Seduction alone can deploy the latter, but only by keeping things in suspense, by an ironic clinamen, and by that disillusion which leaves the field of aesthetics open.

Sometimes the seducer has his weaknesses. Thus it happens that in a surfeit of emotion he launches into a panegyric to female beauty in its infinite divisibility, detailed in its minute erotic variations (pp. 423-24), and then assembled into a single figure, within the heated imagination of an inflamed desire. A vision of God — but immediately taken up and turned around in the imagination of the Devil, in the cold imagination of appearances. Woman is man's dream — God, moreover, drew her from man when he was asleep. She therefore has all the traits of a dream, and in her, one might say, the diurnal scraps of the real combine to form a mirage.

She awakens first at the touch of love; before that time she is a dream. Yet in her dream life we can distinguish two stages: in the first love dreams about her; in the second, she dreams about love (p. 425)

The end comes when she has given herself fully. She is dead, she has lost the grace of her appearance and become her sex; she becomes a woman. For one last moment. “[W]hen she then stands decked out as a bride, and all the magnificence of her attire pales before her beauty, and she herself turns pale...” (p. 431), she still has the splendour of appearances — but soon it will be too late.



Such is the metaphysical lot of the seducer. Beauty, meaning, substance, and above everything else, God *are ethically jealous of themselves*. Most things are ethically possessive; they keep their secrets, and watch over their meanings. Seduction, being on the side of the appearances and the Devil, *is aesthetically possessive*.

After the final abandonment (Cordelia abandons herself, and

she is immediately abandoned), Johannes asks himself: "Have I been constantly faithful to my pact in my relation to Cordelia? That is to say, my pact with the aesthetic. For it is this which makes me strong, that I always have the idea on my side... Has the interesting always been preserved?" (p. 432). Merely to seduce is interesting only in the first degree; but here it is a matter of *what is interesting in the second degree*. This doubling is the secret of the aesthetics. Only what is interesting about the interesting has seduction's aesthetic force.

In a sense, the seducer strives to have the girl's natural charms rise to and shine in the world of pure appearances, i.e., in the sphere of seduction — and there destroy them. For most things, alas, have meaning and depth; but *only some of them rise to the level of appearances*, and they alone are truly seductive. Seduction lies in the transformation of things into pure appearances.



That is how seduction is realized as myth, in the giddiness of appearances, just before being committed to reality. "Everything is symbol; I myself am a myth about myself, for is it not as a myth that I hasten to this meeting? ...Drive now for dear life, even if the horses drop dead, only not a single second before we reach the place." (p. 439)

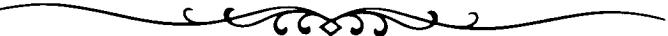
A single night, and it's all over. "I hope never to see her again." She gives everything and falls, like those countless virgins of Greek mythology who were transformed into flowers, and thereby achieved a vegetative and lugubrious grace, the echo of the seduction grace of their first life. But, adds Kierkegaard's seducer cruelly: "...the time is past when a girl suffering the pain of a faithless love can be changed into a sunflower." (p. 439) And in a still more cruel and unexpected manner: "If I were a god, I would do for her what Neptune did for a nymph: I would change her into a man." (p. 440). In a word, the woman does not exist. Only the girl exists by the sublime nature of her state, and the man, by his power to destroy her.

But the mythical passion of seduction does not cease to be ironic. It is crowned with one last melancholy stroke: the ar-

rangement of the interior that will be the setting for the lovers' abandon. One last moment of suspense as the seducer brings together all the scattered lines of his strategy and contemplates them as though before death. What should have been a triumphant setting is already no more than the doleful site of a defunct story. Everything in this house is reconstituted so as to seize hold of Cordelia's imagination at a stroke, at that final moment when she is to be toppled. There is the cabinet in which they met, with the same sofa, the same lamp, the same tea table, as it was all "purported to be" yesterday, and *is* here today, by virtue of an exact resemblance. On the open piano, on the music-rest the same little Swedish melody — Cordelia will enter by the door at the back. Everything is foreseen: she will discover all the scenes they lived together recapitulated. The illusion is perfect. In fact, the game has reached its end, but the seducer reaches new heights of irony by bringing together all the threads he has woven since the beginning in one last display of fireworks, which is, at the same time, a parodic funeral oration to their consummated love.

After which Cordelia will no longer appear, except in several desperate letters that open the story, and even her despair is strange. She was not exactly deceived or dispossessed, but *spiritually diverted* by a game whose rules she was not aware of. She was played with, as though under a spell. She has the impression of having been, without realizing it, the trophy in some very intimate and devastating plot, the object of a spiritual abduction. In effect, she was robbed of her own seduction, which was then turned against her. Hers is a nameless fate, and the stupor that results is different from mere despair.

Such victims were of a quite distinct nature.  
 ...There was no visible change in their appearance; they maintained their customary relationships, as respected as ever, and yet they were changed, almost inexplicably to themselves... Their lives were not like those snapped off or broken, but they had become introspective; lost to others, they vainly sought to find themselves. (p. 303)



## THE FEAR OF BEING SEDUCED

If seduction is a passion or destiny, it is usually the opposite passion that prevails – that of not being seduced. We struggle to confirm ourselves in our truth: we fight against that which seeks to seduce us.

In this struggle all means are acceptable, ranging from relentlessly seducing the other in order not to be seduced oneself, to pretending to be seduced in order to cut all seduction short.



The hysterical combines the passion of seduction with that of simulation. She protects herself from seduction by offering booby-trapped signs which, even as they put themselves forward in exaggerated fashion, cannot be believed. The scruples, the excessive remorse, the pathetic advances and endless entreaties, her way of spinning events so that they dissolve and she herself becomes elusive, the giddiness she imposes on others, and the deception – it is all seductive deterrence, whose obscure objective is less to seduce than to never let oneself seduce.

The hysterical has no intimacy, emotions, or secrets. She is entirely given over to external blackmail, to the ephemeral but total credibility of her “symptoms,” the absolute need to be be-

lied (like the mythomaniac with his stories) but at the same time, to disappoint all belief – and this without appealing to some shared delusion. An uncompromising demand, but completely insensitive as to its response. A demand that is put into question by its choreography, and by the effect of its signs. Seduction too mocks the truth of signs, but makes it into a reversible appearance, while the hysterical plays with the signs but without sharing them. It is as if she appropriated the entire process of seduction for herself, as if she was bidding with herself, while leaving the other only the ultimatum of her hysterical *conversion*, without any possible *reversion*. The hysterical succeeds in making her own body a barrier to seduction: a seductress paralyzed by her own body and fascinated by her own symptoms. And who seeks to petrify others in turn, by an elusiveness that seeks to allay suspicions, but remains only a pathetic psychodrama. If seduction is a challenge, hysteria is blackmail.

Most signs and messages today solicit us in this hysterical manner. They would make-us-believe, make-us-speak and make-us-come by dissuasion. They would blackmail us with a blind, psychodramatic transaction, using signs devoid of meaning, that multiply and hypertrophy precisely because they no longer have any secrets or credibility. Signs without faith, without affect or history, signs terrified at the idéa of signifying – just as the hysterical is terrified at the idea of being seduced.

In reality, the inner absence that inheres in the self terrifies the hysterical. She must drain herself, with her continual play, of this absence in the secrecy of which she could be loved, and could love herself. In this way she forms a mirror behind which – near suicide, but turning suicide, like everything else, into a bothersome, theatrical process of seduction – she remains immortal in her “spectacular” domain.

The same process, but reversed, can be found in anorexia, frigidity and impotence. By turning one's body into a mirror – but a mirror that has, as it were, been turned against the wall by effacing the potential seductiveness of one's body – by disenchanting and desexualizing it, one is still resorting to blackmail and delivering an ultimatum: “You will not seduce me, I dare you to try.” Seduction, however, shows through in its very

negation, since the dare is one of its fundamental forms. A challenge must be met with a response, (without wanting to) a challenge has to let itself seduce – but here the game has been closed down. And closed down all the more emphatically by the body, by its dramatization of a refusal of seduction – while the hysterical gets out of the game by dramatizing a demand for seduction. In both cases, however, seduction, whether as seducer or seduced, is denied.

The problem, therefore, is not one of sexual or alimentary impotence, with its train of psychoanalytic reasons and unreason, but concerns an *impotence as regards seduction*. The disaffection, neurosis, anguish and frustration encountered by psychoanalysis comes no doubt from being unable to love or to be loved, from being unable to give or take pleasure, but the radical disenchantment comes from seduction and its failure. Only those who lie completely outside seduction are ill, even if they remain fully capable of loving and making love. Psychoanalysis believes it treats the disorders of sex and desire, but in reality it is dealing with the disorders of seduction (which it has helped, not inconsiderably, to place outside seduction and imprison within the dilemma of sex). The most serious deficiencies always concern charm and not pleasure, enchantment and not some vital or sexual satisfaction, the (game's) rule and not the (symbolic) Law. To be deprived of seduction is the only true form of castration.

Fortunately, the latter continuously fails. Seduction rises like the phoenix from the ashes, with the subject being unable to prevent all this from again becoming, as with anorexia or impotence, a last desperate attempt at seduction, and the denial from again becoming a dare. Perhaps it is in these aggravated forms of sexual self-denial that seduction expresses itself in its purest form, since it still asks the other to: "Prove to me that it's not just a matter of 'that.' "



There are other passions opposed to seduction, though fortunately, they too usually fail when taken to extremes. The passion for collecting, for example, the fetishism of the collector.

Its antagonistic affinity with seduction is strong, perhaps because it too involves a game with rules, whose intensity is such that it can substitute itself for any other game. For it too invokes a passion for an abstraction that defies every moral law, in order to maintain the rigid ceremonial of the closed universe within which the subject confines himself.

The collector is possessive. He seeks exclusive rights over the dead object with which he appeases his fetishist passion. Reclusion and confinement: beyond all else he is collecting himself. And he is not to be distracted from his madness, since his love of the object, the amorous stratagems with which he surrounds it, display a hatred and fear of seduction. And not just the seductiveness of the object: he is just as repelled by any seduction that might emanate from himself.

*The Collector*, the film and novel, illustrate this delirium. The protagonist, being unable to seduce or be loved (but does he want seduction and the spontaneity of love? certainly not – he wants to force the seduction, he wants to force love), kidnaps a young woman and confines her in the basement of his country house, which has been specially equipped for the purpose. He installs her, cares for her, surrounds her with numerous courtesies, but checks all attempts at escape, outsmarts all her ruses, and will spare her only if she admits herself defeated and seduced, only if, in the end, she loves him spontaneously. In time, however, with this forced promiscuity, an indecisive and troubled connivence forms between them – and one evening he invites her to dine upstairs, with all precautions taken. And what happens? She genuinely tries to seduce him and offers herself to him. Perhaps she loves him at this moment, perhaps she only wants to disarm him. Both no doubt. But whatever the case, her behaviour provokes a panic reaction, and he hits her, insults her and throws her back in the cave. He no longer respects her, he undresses her and takes pornographic pictures which he places in a photo album (he collects butterflies, and has shown her his collection with pride). She gets sick and falls into a sort of coma: he no longer cares for her: she dies and he buries her in his yard. In the last scene, he is seen looking for another woman to kidnap and seduce at whatever cost.

A need to be loved, but an inability to be seduced. When,

finally, the woman is seduced (it is enough that she wants to seduce him) he cannot accept his victory: he prefers to see it as a sexual malediction and punishes her. It is not a question of impotence (it is never a question of impotence). He prefers the possessive spell cast by a collection of dead objects – the dead sex object being as beautiful as a butterfly with fluorescent wings – to the seduction of a living being who would demand his love in return. He prefers the monotonous fascination of the collection, the fascination with dead differences, this obsession with the same, over the seduction of the other. This is why one senses from the beginning that she will die, not because he is a dangerous madman, but because he is logical, motivated by an irreversible logic. To seduce without being seduced – without reversibility.

In this case, one of the two terms must die, and it is always the same since the other is already dead. The other is immortal and indestructible, as in every perversion. This is illustrated by the fact that the film ends where it began (and not without humour – possessive people, like perverse people, have a good sense of humour outside the sphere of their obsession, including in the minutiae of their proceedings). In any case, the collector has enclosed himself within an insoluble logic: all the signs of love she can give him will be interpreted in a contrary manner. And the most tender will be the most suspect. He might perhaps be satisfied with the appropriate signs, but he cannot bear the genuine enticements of love. Within his logic, she has signed her own death warrant.

This is not a story about sadism – it is too moving. Who said that the best proof of love is to respect the other and his or her desires? Perhaps the price paid by beauty and seduction is to be confined and put to death, because they are too dangerous, and because one will never be able to render her what she has given. One can then only reward her with her death. In a sense, the girl recognizes this since she responds to this higher seduction offered her in the metaphor of her confinement. It is just that she cannot respond except by offering herself sexually – and this appears trivial relative to the challenge she herself poses by her beauty. Sexual pleasure will never abolish the need for seduction. Formerly all mortals were obliged

to redeem their living bodies with a sacrifice; today all seductive forms, perhaps all living forms, have to redeem themselves by their death. This is a symbolic law – which is, moreover, not a law but an unavoidable rule, that is, we adhere to it without grounds, as something arbitrary yet obvious, and not in accord with some transcendent principle.

Should one conclude that every attempt at seduction ends with the murder of the object, or that it always – and this is a variation on the same theme – involves an attempt to drive the other mad? Is the spell one exercises over the other always harmful? Is one only seeking to avenge the spell that the other exercises over you? Is the game being played here a game of life or death, or at least closer to death than the serene exchange of sexual pleasure? To seduce implies that the other will pay for the fact of being seduced, that is, for having been torn from him/herself and made into an object of sorcery. Here everything obeys the symbolic rule of immediate apportionment which dictates the sacrificial relations between men and their gods in cultures of cruelty, that is, relations of recognition and dispensation of unlimited violence. Now seduction belongs to cultures of cruelty, and is the only ceremonial form of the latter left to us. It is what draws our attention to death, not in its organic and accidental form, but as something necessary and rigorous, the inevitable consequence of the game's rules. Death remains the ultimate risk in every symbolic pact, be it that supposed by a challenge, a secret, a seduction or a perversion.



Seduction and perversion maintain subtle relations. Doesn't seduction imply a form of the diversion of the world's order? And yet, of all the passions, of all the movements of the soul, perversion is perhaps the most opposed to seduction.

Both are cruel and indifferent relative to sex.

Seduction is something that seizes hold of all pleasures, affects and representations, and gets ahold of dreams themselves in order to reroute them from their primary course; turning them into a sharper, more subtle game, whose stakes have neither an end nor an origin, and concerns neither drives nor desires.

If sex has a *natural law*, a pleasure principle, then seduction consists in denying that principle and replacing it with a rule, the *arbitrary* rule of a game. In this sense, seduction is *perverse*. The immorality of perversion, like that of seduction, does not come from abandoning oneself to the joys of sex in opposition to all morality; it results from something more serious and subtle, the abandonment of sex itself as a referent and a morality, even in its "joys."

Play, not sensual pleasure. The pervert is cold when it comes to sex. He transmutes sex and sexuality into a ritual carrier, a ritual and ceremonial abstraction, a burning concern with signs rather than an exchange of desires. With the pervert, all the intensity of sex is displaced onto the signs and their sequence, just as in Artaud this intensity is displaced onto the theatrical unfolding (the savage irruption of signs into reality). Their violence is ceremonial – and by no means instinctual; only the rite is violent, only the rules of the game are violent, because they put an end to the system formed by reality. This is true cruelty, and has nothing to do with bloodlust. And in this sense, perversion is cruel.

Perversion's power of fascination comes from a ritual cult based on rules. The pervert is not someone who transgresses the law, but someone who eludes the law in order to dedicate himself to the rule, someone, then, who evades not just the reproductive finality of the sexual order, but that order itself, with its symbolic law, in order to link up with a regulated, ritualized, ceremonial form.

Perversion supposes a contract that is not a contract, that is, a transaction between two free agents, but a *pact* upholding the observance of a rule. As such it establishes a duel relation (like a challenge) that excludes all third parties (unlike a contract) and cannot be dissociated into its individual terms. It is this pact, this duel relation, with its web of obligations *foreign to the law*, which renders perversion invulnerable to the external world – and impenetrable to analysis in terms of the individual unconscious, and thus to psychoanalysis. For the realm of the rule is not part of psychoanalysis's jurisdiction, which concerns law alone. Perversion, on the other hand, belongs to this other universe.

*The duel relation abolishes the law of exchange.* The rules of perversion abolish sex's natural law. Arbitrary, like the rules of a game, the contents are of little consequence; what is essential is the imposition of a rule or sign, or system of signs, which abstracts from the sexual order (it might be, as with Klossowski, coins that, oblivious to the natural law of exchange, become the ritual carrier of perversion).

Hence the affinity between convents, secret societies, Sade's chateaux, and the universe of perversion. The oaths, the rites, the interminable Sadian protocols. What joins them together is a cult of the rule – and not its absence in licentiousness. And within these rules, the pervert or perverse couple can admit social strains and distortions without difficulty, since the latter concern the law alone (thus, according to Goblot, within the bourgeois class, one can do anything provided the class rule, the system of arbitrary signs that defines it as a caste, remains unharmed). All transgressions are possible, but not an infraction of the Rule.

Thus, in their common challenge to the natural order, perversion and seduction resemble each other. But on numerous occasions they are violently opposed, as in the story of *The Collector*, where a perverse, possessive passion triumphs over seduction. Or in the story of "The Dancer" related by Leo Scheer: A concentration camp guard forces a young Jewess to dance for him before her death. She does so, and as her dancing leaves him spellbound, she is able to approach him, steal his weapon and kill him. Of the two universes, that of the SS, exemplifying a staggering, perverse power, a power of fascination (that vested in the sovereignty of the person who holds a life in his hands), and that of the girl, exemplifying seduction by the dance, the latter triumphs. Seduction invades the order of fascination and turns it upside down (though most of the time it is not even given the chance to enter). It is clear here that the two logics exclude each other, and that each represents a mortal danger for the other.

But isn't there a continuous cycle of reversion between the two? The collector's passion ends up, after all, exercising a kind of seduction over the girl (or is it only fascination? But, once again, where's the difference?). A certain vertigo results from

her desperate attempt to circumscribe a foreclosed universe, whereby, at the same time, she discloses a sink hole or void that exercises, by its anti-seduction, a new form of attraction.

A certain kind of seduction is perverse: hysteria, since it uses seduction to defend itself from seduction. But a certain perversion is seductive, since it uses the detour of perversion to seduce.

With hysteria seduction becomes obscene. But in certain forms of pornography, obscenity again becomes seductive. Violence can seduce, and even rape. The odious and the abject can seduce. Where does the detour of seduction stop? Where does the cycle of reversion end, and should it be stopped?

However, a profound difference remains: the pervert is radically suspicious of seduction and tries to codify it. He tries to fix its rules, formalize them in a text, express them in a pact. In so doing, he breaks a basic rule, that of the secret. Instead of upholding seduction's supple ceremonial, the pervert wants a fixed ceremonial, a fixed duel. By making the rule into something sacred and obscene, by designating it as an end, *that is to say, as a law*, he traces an uncompromising defense: for it is the theater of the rule that gains ascendancy, as in hysteria the theater of the body. More generally, all the perverse forms of seduction have the following in common: they betray its secret and the fundamental rule, which is that the rule remain unspoken.

In this sense, the seducer himself is perverse. For he too deflects seduction from its rule of secrecy, and does so intentionally. He is to seduction what the cheater is to the game. If the purpose of the game is to win, then the cheater is the only true player. If seduction had an objective, then the seducer would be its ideal figure. But neither seduction nor the game can be thus characterized, and there is a good chance that what determines the cheater's actions, his cynical stratagems to win at all costs, is his hatred of the game, his rejection of the seduction proper to the game – just as there is a good chance that the seducer's behaviour is determined by his fear of being seduced, and of having to face the risk of a challenge to his own truth. This is what leads him to his first sexual conquest, and then to the countless conquests where he can fetishize his

strategy.

The pervert always gets involved in a maniacal universe of mastery and the law. He seeks mastery over the fetishized rule and absolute ritual circumscription. The latter is no longer playful. It no longer moves. It is dead, and can no longer put anything into play except its own death. Fetishism is the seduction of death, including the death of the rule in perversion.

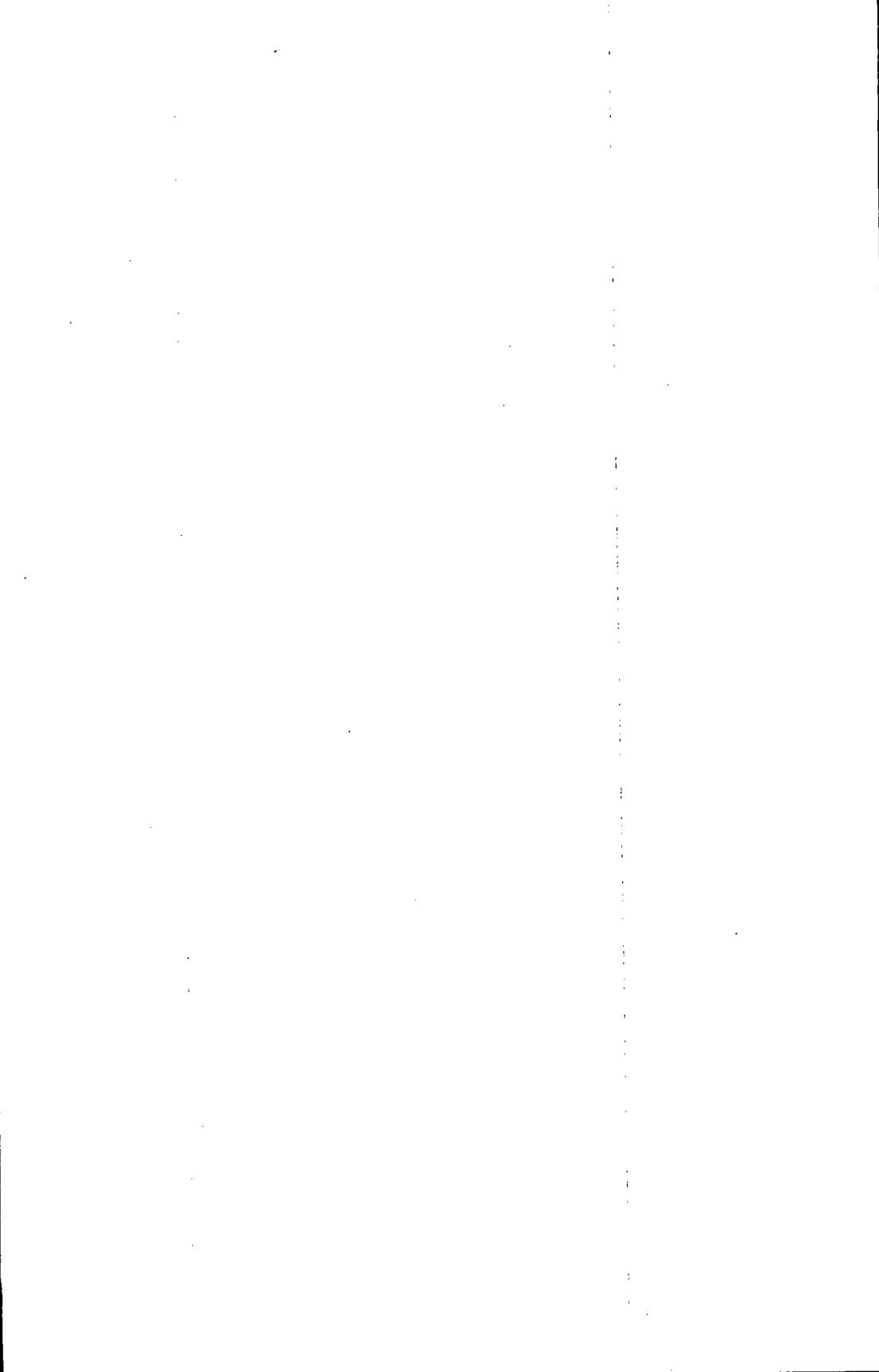
Perversion is a frozen challenge; seduction, a living challenge. Seduction is shifting and ephemeral; perversion, monotonous and interminable. Perversion is theatrical and complicit; seduction, secret and reversible.



Systems obsessed with their systematicity are fascinating: they tune in death as an energy of fascination. Thus the collector's passion tries to circumscribe and immobilize seduction before transforming it into a death energy. It is then *the flaw of such systems that becomes seductive*. Terror is dissipated by irony. Or else seduction lies in wait for systems at their point of inertia, that point at which they stop, where there is no longer any beyond, nor any possible representation – a point of no return where the trajectories slow down and the object is absorbed by its own force of resistance and density. What happens in the environs of this point of inertia? The object is distorted like the sun refracted by the different layers of the horizon; crushed by its own mass, it no longer obeys its own laws. We know almost nothing about such processes of inertia, except that at the edge of this black hole the point of no return becomes a point of total reversibility, a catastrophic point where death is pulled tight to be released in a new seduction effect.

**III**

**THE POLITICAL DESTINY OF  
SEDUCTION**





## THE PASSION FOR RULES

*No player must be greater than the game itself*

Rollerball

The *Diary of the Seducer* claims that in seduction the subject is never the master of his master plan, and even when the latter is deployed in full consciousness, it still submits to the rules of a game that goes beyond it. A ritual dramaturgy beyond the law, seduction is both game and fate, and as such pushes the protagonists towards their inevitable end without the rule being broken – for it is the rule that binds them. And the rule's basic dictum is that the game continue whatever the cost, be it death itself. There is, then, a sort of passion that binds the players to the rule that ties them together – without which the game would not be possible.

Ordinarily we live within the realm of the Law, even when fantasizing its abolition. Beyond the law we see only its transgression or the lifting of a prohibition. For the discourse of law and interdiction determines the inverse discourse of transgression and liberation. *However, it is not the absence of the law that is opposed to the law, but the Rule.*

The Rule plays on an immanent sequence of arbitrary signs, while the Law is based on a transcendent sequence of necessary signs. The one concerns cycles, the recurrence of conventional procedures, while the other is an instance based in an irreversible continuity. The one involves obligations, the other constraints and prohibitions. Because the Law establishes a line, it can and must be transgressed. By contrast, it makes no sense

to “transgress” a game’s rules; within a cycle’s recurrence, there is no line one can jump (instead, one simply leaves the game). Because the Law – whether that of the signifier, castration, or a social interdiction – claims to be the discursive sign of a legal instance and hidden truth, it results in repression and prohibitions, and thus the division into a manifest and a latent discourse. Given that the rule is conventional and arbitrary, and has no hidden truth, it knows neither repression nor the distinction between the manifest and the latent. It does not carry any meaning, it does not lead anywhere; by contrast, the Law has a determinate finality. The endless, reversible cycle of the Rule is opposed to the linear, finalized progression of the Law.

Signs do not have the same status in the one as in the other. The Law is part of the world of representation, and is therefore subject to interpretation or decipherment. It involves decrees or statements, and is not indifferent to the subject. It is a *text*, and falls under the influence of meaning and referentiality. By contrast, the Rule has no subject, and the form of its utterance is of little consequence; one does not decipher the rules, nor derive pleasure from their comprehension – only their observance matters, and the resulting giddiness. This also distinguishes the passion for the game’s rituals and intensity from the pleasure that attaches to obedience to the Law, or its transgression.



In order to understand the intensity of ritual forms, one must rid oneself of the idea that all happiness derives from nature, and all pleasure from the satisfaction of a desire. On the contrary, games, the sphere of play, reveal a passion for rules, a giddiness born of rules, and a force that comes from ceremony, and not desire.

Does the delight one experiences in a game come from a dream-like situation, where one moves free of reality, but which one can quit at any time? Not at all. Games, unlike dreams, are subject to rules, and one just doesn’t leave a game. Games create obligations like those found in challenges. To leave a game is unsportsmanlike. And the fact that one cannot refuse to play

a game from within – a fact that explains its enchantment and differentiates it from “reality” – creates a symbolic pact which compels one to observe the rules without reserve, and to pursue the game to the end, as one pursues a challenge to the end.

The order instituted by the game, being conventional, is incommensurable with the necessary order of the real world: it is neither ethical nor psychological, and its acceptance (the acceptance of the rules) implies neither resignation nor constraint. As such, there is no freedom in our moral and individual sense of that term, in games. They are not to be equated with liberty. Games do not obey the dialectic of free will, that hypothetical dialectic of the sphere of the real and the law. To enter into a game is to enter a system of ritual obligations. Its intensity derives from its initiatory form – not from our liberty, as we would like to believe, following an ideology that sees only a single, “natural” source of happiness and pleasure.

The game’s sole principle, though it is never posed as universal, is that *by choosing the rule one is delivered from the law*.

Without a psychological or metaphysical foundation, the rule has no grounding in belief. One neither believes nor disbelieves a rule – one observes it. The diffuse sphere of belief, the need for credibility that encompasses the real, is dissolved in the game. Hence their immorality: *to proceed without believing in it*, to sanction a direct fascination with conventional signs and groundless rules.

Debts too are annulled. In games there is nothing to redeem, no accounts to settle with the past. For this reason, games appear unaware of the dialectic of the possible and impossible, there being no accounts to settle with the future. There is nothing “possible,” since everything is played, everything decided, without hope and without alternatives, according to a relentless, unmediated logic. That is why there is no laughter around the poker table, for its logic is cool (but not casual); and the game being without hope, is never obscene and never lends itself to laughter. Games are serious, more serious than life, as seen in the paradoxical fact that in a game lives can be at stake.

Games, therefore, are no more based on the pleasure principle than the reality principle. They suppose the enchantment of the rule, and the sphere that the rule describes. And the lat-

ter is not a sphere of illusion or diversion, but involves another logic, an artificial, initiatory logic wherein the natural determinants of life and death have been abolished. This constitutes the specificity of games and their stakes. It makes no sense to reduce them to an economic logic that would speak of conscious investment, or to a logic of desire that would speak of unconscious motives. Conscious or unconscious – this double determination may be valid for the sphere of meaning and law, but not for rules and games.



The Law describes a potentially universal system of meaning and value. It aims at objective recognition. On the basis of its underlying transcendence, the Law constitutes itself into an instance for the totalization of the real, with all the revolutions and transgressions clearing the way to the law's universalization. By contrast, the Rule is immanent to a limited and restricted system, which it describes without transcending, and within which it is immutable. The rule does not aspire to universality and, strictly speaking, it lacks all exteriority since it does not institute an internal scission. It is the Law's transcendence that establishes the irreversibility of meaning and value. And it is the rule's immanence, its arbitrary, circumscriptive character, that leads, in its own sphere, to the reversibility of meaning and the reversion of the Law.

The inscription of rules in a sphere without a beyond (it's no longer a universe, since it no longer aspires to universality) is as difficult to understand as the idea of a finite universe. A boundary without something beyond it is unimaginable. For us the finite is always set against the infinite; but the sphere of games is neither finite nor infinite – transfinite perhaps. It has its own finite contours, with which it resists the infinity of analytic space. To reinvent a rule is to resist the linear infinitude of analytic space in order to recover a reversible space. For a rule has its own revolution, in the literal sense of the word: the convection towards a central point and the cycle's reversion (this is how rituals function within a cyclical world), independent of every logic of cause and effect, origin and end.

This marks the end of the centrifugal dimension: the sudden, intensive gravitation of space and abolition of time, which implodes in a flash to become so dense that it escapes the traditional laws of physics – its entire course spiraling inwards towards the center where the density is greatest. This is the game's fascination, the crystalline passion that erases memory traces and forfeits meaning. All passion comes close, in its form, to the latter, but the passion for gaming is the purest.

The best analogy would be with primitive cultures, which have been described as closed in on themselves, incapable of conceiving of the rest of the world. But in our society the rest of the world exists only for us. Their closure, far from being restrictive, derives from a different logic which, because we are trapped within the imaginary of the universal, can no longer conceive of except pejoratively, as limited.

The symbolic sphere of these cultures knows no remains. In games too, unlike the real, there is nothing left over. Because they have neither history, memory nor internal accumulation (the stakes are constantly being consumed and reversed, it being an unspoken rule that, while the game is in progress, one cannot withdraw anything in the form of a gain or "surplus value"), they leave no residue within. Nor is there anything that remains outside the game. The "remainder" supposes an unsolved equation, an unrealized destiny, something subtracted or repressed. But a game's *equation is always perfectly balanced*, and its destiny always fulfilled, without leaving any traces (something that distinguishes it from the unconscious).

The theory of the unconscious supposes that certain affects, scenes or signifiers can no longer be put into play, that they are foreclosed, outside-the-game. The game, on the other hand, is based on the hypothesis that everything can be put into play. Otherwise it would have to be admitted that one has always already lost, that one is playing in order to always lose. In the game, however, no objects are wasted. There is nothing irreducible to the game which precedes the game – and in particular, no previous debts. If within games, something is exorcised, it is not some debt contracted vis-a-vis the law. It is *the Law itself that is exorcised as an unforgivable crime*, as discriminatory, an irreconcilable transcendence within the real. And its

transgression only adds a new crime to that of the law – and new debts and griefs.

The Law establishes equality as a principle: in principle everyone is equal before the Law. By contrast, there is no equality before the rule; for the latter has no jurisdiction over principles. Moreover, in order for everyone to be equal they must be separated. The players, however, are not separate or individualized: they are instituted in a dual and agonistic relation. They are not even solidary – solidarity supposing a *formal* conception of the social, the moral ideal of a group in competition. The players are *tied* to each other; their parity entails an obligation that does not require solidarity, at least not as something that needs to be conceptualized or interiorized.

The rule has no need of a formal structure or superstructure – whether moral or psychological – to function. Precisely because rules are arbitrary and ungrounded, because they have no referents, they do not require a consensus, nor any collective will or truth. They exist, that's all. And they exist only when shared, while the Law floats above scattered individuals.

Their logic is clearly illustrated by what Goblot claims, in *La Barrière et le Niveau*, is the cultural rule of castes (and of the bourgeois class as well):

1. Total parity amongst the players within the space created by the Rule: this is the “level.”
2. Beyond the Rule, the foreclosing of the rest of the world: this is the “barrier.”

Within its own domain, extraterritoriality, in the obligations and privileges, absolute reciprocity: games restore this logic in its pure state. The agonistic relation between the players can never jeopardize their reciprocal, privileged status. The game might come to naught and its stakes lost – still the reciprocal enchantment, and the arbitrariness of the Rule at its source, must be preserved.

This is why duel relations can exclude all effort, merit or personal qualities (above all, in the pure form of games of chance). Personal traits are admitted only as a kind of favour or enticement, and have no psychological equivalents. This is how games go – as demanded by the divine transparency of the Rule.

In a finite space, one is delivered from the universal – with

an immediate, duel parity, one is delivered from equality – with obligations one is delivered from freedom – in the arbitrariness of the Rule and its ceremonial, one is delivered from the law. Thus the enchantment of games.



In a sense, we are more equal within ceremonials than before the Law (perhaps this accounts for the insistence on politeness, on ceremonial conformity, particularly amongst the less cultivated classes; it being easier to share conventional signs than signs laden with meaning or signs of “intelligence”). We also have more freedom in games than anywhere else, for we do not have to internalize the rules; we owe the rules only a token fidelity, and do not feel we have to transgress them, as is the case with the law. With the rule we are free of the Law – and of all the constraints of choice, freedom, responsibility and meaning! The terrorism of meaning can only be dissipated by arbitrary signs.

However, make no mistake about it: conventional or ritual signs are *binding*. One is not free to signify in isolation while still maintaining a coherent relation with reality or truth. The freedom demanded by modern signs, like modern individuals, to articulate themselves according to their affects or desire (for meaning) does not exist for conventional signs. The latter cannot set off aimlessly, with their own referent or scrap of meaning as ballast. Each sign is tied to others, not within the abstract structure of language, but within the senseless unfolding of a ceremonial; they echo each other and reduplicate themselves in other, equally arbitrary signs.

The ritual sign is not a representative sign. It is not, therefore, something worth understanding. Instead, it delivers us from meaning. This is why we are so committed to such signs. The gaming debt is a debt of honour; everything concerning the game is sacred because conventional.



In *A Lover's Discourse* Roland Barthes justifies his choice of

an alphabetical order in the following terms: "to discourage the temptation of meaning, it was necessary to choose an *absolutely insignificant* order," that is to say, neither an intended order, nor one of pure chance, but a perfectly conventional order. For "we must not," he writes, citing a mathematician, "underestimate the power of chance to engender monsters," that is, logical sequences – meaning.

In other words, total liberty, or total indeterminacy are not opposed to meaning. One can produce meaning simply by playing with chance or disorder. New diagonals of meaning, new sequences can be engendered from the untamed flood tides of desire – as in certain modern philosophies, the molecular or intensive philosophies, which claim to undermine meaning by diffraction, hook-ups and the Brownian movements of desire. As with chance, we must not underestimate the power of desire to engender (logical) monsters.

One does not escape meaning by dissociation, disconnection or deterritorialization. One escapes meaning by replacing it with a more radical simulacrum, a still more conventional order – like the alphabetical order for Barthes, or the rules of a game, or the innumerable rituals of everyday life which frustrate both the (political, historical or social) order of meaning and the disorder (chance) which one would impose on them.

Indeterminacy, dissociation or proliferation in the form of a star or rhizome only generalize meaning's sphere of influence to the entire sphere of non-sense. That is, they merely generalize meaning's pure form, an abstract finality with neither a determinate end nor contents. *Only rituals abolish meaning.*



This is why there are no "rituals of transgression." The very expression makes no sense, especially when applied to the festival. The latter has proved very problematic for our revolutionaries: is the festival a transgression or regeneration of the Law? An absurd question, for rituals, including the ritual liturgy of the festival, belong to neither the domain of the Law, nor its transgression, but to that of the Rule.

The same applies to magic. We are constantly interpreting

what falls under the rule in the terms of the law. Thus, magic is seen as an attempt to outwit the laws of production and hard work. Primitives have the same "utilitarian" ends as us, but in order to realize them, they would rather avoid rational exertion. Magic, however, is something very different: it is a ritual for the maintenance of the world as a play of analogical relations, a cyclical progression where everything is linked together by their signs. An immense game, rule governs magic, and the basic problem is to ensure, by means of ritual, that everything continues to play thus, by analogical contiguity and creeping seduction. It has nothing to do with linear relations of cause and effect. The latter – our way of understanding the world – is objective but unsettled. For it has broken the rule.

Magic does not seek to fool the law. It doesn't cheat – and to judge it as such is absurd. One might just as well dispute the arbitrariness of a game's rules in terms of the "objective" givens of nature.

The same simplistic and objectivistic misunderstanding occurs with gambling. Here the objective would be economic: to become rich without exerting oneself. The same attempt to skip steps as in magic. The same transgression of the principle of equivalence and hard work which rules the "real" world. The claim, then, is that gambling's truth is to be found in the tricks it plays on value.

But one is forgetting here the game's power of seduction. Not just the power one experiences when momentarily carried away, but the power to transmute values that comes with the rule. In gambling money is *seduced*, deflected from its truth. Having been cut off from the law of equivalences (it "burns") and the law of representation, money is no longer a sign or representation once transformed into a stake. And a stake is not something one invests. As an investment money takes the form of capital, but as a stake it appears in the form of a challenge. Placing a bet has as little to do with placing an investment, as libidinal investment with the stakes of seduction.

Investments and counter-investments – they belong to the psychic economy of drives and sex. Games, stakes and challenges are the figures of passion and seduction. More generally, all the stuff of money, language, sex and affect undergo

a complete change of meaning depending on whether they are mobilized as an investment or transposed into a stake. The two moments are irreducible.



If games had a finality, the only true player would be the cheater. Now, if a certain amount of prestige can be acquired by transgressing the law, there is no prestige in cheating or transgressing a rule. In truth, the cheater cannot transgress the rules since the game, not being a system of interdictions, does not have lines one can cross. One does not "transgress" a rule, one fails to observe it. And non-observance does not lead to a state of transgression; it brings one back under the jurisdiction of the law.

This is the case with the cheater, who denies or, even better, profanes the game's ceremonial conventions for economic reasons (or psychological reasons, if he cheats simply for the pleasure of winning), and thereby restores the laws of the real world. By introducing factors of an individual nature, he destroys the game's "duel" enchantment. If cheating was once punished by death and is still condemned strongly, it is because, as a crime, it resembles incest: cultural rules being broken to the sole profit of the "laws of nature."

For the cheater, there is no longer anything at stake. He confuses the stakes with surplus-value. But the stakes are what enables one to play, and to turn them into the game's purpose is to abuse one's position of trust. In a similar manner, the rules establish the very possibility of playing, the space within which the sides confront each other. To treat the rules as ends (or as laws or truths) is to destroy both the game and its stakes. The rules have no autonomy, that quality which, according to Marx, characterizes commodities, both individually and in general, and is the sacrosanct value of the economic domain. The cheater too is *autonomous*: he establishes a law, his own law, against the arbitrary rituals of the rule – this is what disqualifies him. And he is free – this explains his downfall. Moreover, he is rather dreary, because he no longer exposes himself to the seduction of games, because he refuses the vertigo of seduction. By way

of hypothesis, one might postulate that personal advantage is only an alibi: in reality he cheats *in order to escape seduction*; he cheats because he is afraid of being seduced.



The challenge of a game is very different, and games are always a challenge – and not just when played around a table. Consider the American who had the following classified advertisement printed in the paper: "Send me a dollar!" And then received tens of thousands of dollars. He did not promise anything – he was not, therefore, swindling anyone. Nor did he say: "I need a dollar" – nobody would have ever given him a dollar under such circumstances. Somewhere he had let float the off-chance of a miraculous exchange. *Something more than an equivalence*. A bluff. He was offering the public a challenge...

What sort of sublime transaction were they negotiating when, instead of buying a dollar's worth of ice cream, they sent in their money? They never really believed they would receive ten thousand dollars in return. In truth, they took up the challenge in their own way, and it was as valid as any other, for they were being offered a wishbone where one wins on both counts:

One never knows, it might work (ten thousand dollars in the mail), in which case, one has received a sign of the Gods' favour (which Gods? those who had printed the ad).

If it doesn't work, it is because the obscure instance that gave me the sign did not take up my challenge. So much the better. Psychologically I have beaten the Gods.

A double challenge: the con man challenges the sucker and the latter challenges fate. If he is overwhelmed by fate, he is in the clear. One can always count on culpability to look for ways of being exorcised, but it really isn't a question of guilt. To send a dollar in response to the absurd challenge of the advertisement, is the sacrificial response *par excellence*. It can be

summed up as: "There must be something behind this. I will summon the Gods to respond or else to disappear" – and reducing the Gods to nothing is always a source of pleasure.



Stakes and challenges, summoning and bluffing – there is no question of belief in all this. Moreover, one never "believes" in anything. It is never a question of believing or not believing, no more than for Santa Claus. Belief is an absurd concept, of the same type as motivation, need, instinct, i.e., drive, desire, and God knows what else – facile tautologies that hide from us the fact that our actions are never grounded psychologically in belief, but in stakes and challenges. It is never a matter of carefully reasoned speculation on existence (on the existence of God, or of someone with a dollar), but of continual provocation, of a game. One does not believe in God, just as one does not "believe" in chance – except in the humdrum discourses of religion or psychology. One challenges them, they challenge you, one plays with them, and they play with you: for this *one does not have to believe in them*.

Thus faith in the religious sphere is similar to seduction in the game of love. Belief is turned to *the existence of God* – and existence has only an impoverished, residual status, being what is left when all else has been removed – while faith is a *challenge to God's existence*, a challenge to God to exist, and in return, to die. One *seduces* God with faith, and He cannot but respond, for seduction, like the challenge, is a reversible form. And He responds a hundredfold by His grace to the challenge of faith. As with all ritual exchanges, the whole forms a system of obligations, with God being obliged and even compelled to respond – even as *He is never compelled to exist*. Belief is satisfied with asking Him to exist and underwrite the world's existence – it is the disenchanted, contractual form. But faith turns God into a stake: God challenges man to exist (and he can respond to this challenge with his death), and man challenges God to respond to his sacrifice, that is, to disappear in return.

One always aspires to something more than mere existence, and something more than an equivalent value – and this some-

thing more, the challenge's immoderation compared to the contract, its intemperance compared to the equivalence of cause and effect, is clearly the result of seduction – that of games and magic. If we have experienced this in amorous seduction, why not in our relations with the world? Symbolic efficacy is not an empty concept. It reflects the existence of another form of the circulation of goods and signs, a form far more effective and powerful than economic circulation. What is fascinating about a miraculous win at the gaming tables is not the money: it is the resumption of ties with these other, symbolic circuits of unmediated and immoderate bidding, which concern the *seduction of the order of things*.

In the last analysis, there is nothing to prevent things from being seduced like beings – one simply has to find the game's rules.

The entire problem of chance appears here. Magic, as a wager, is similar to our games of chance. What is at stake is the particle of value thrown in the face of chance considered as a transcendent instance, not in order to win its favours, but to dismiss its transcendence, its abstraction, and turn it into a partner, an adversary. The stake is a summons, the game a duel: chance is summoned to respond, obliged by the player's wager to declare itself either favourable or hostile. Chance is never neutral, the game transforms it into a player and agonistic figure.

Which is another way of saying that the basic assumption behind the game is that *chance does not exist*.

Chance in its modern, rational sense, chance as an aleatory mechanism, pure probability subjected to the *laws* of probability (and not to the rules of a game) – a sort of Great Neutral Aleatorium (G.N.A.), the epitome of a fluctuating universe dominated by statistical abstractions, a secularized, disenchanted and unbound divinity. This kind of chance does not exist in games; they exist to ward it off. Games of chance deny that the world is arranged contingently; on the contrary they seek to override any such neutral order and recreate a ritual order of obligations which undermines the free world of equivalences. In this manner games are radically opposed to the economy and Law. They question the *reality* of chance as an objective law and replace it with an inter-connected, propitious, duel, agonistic and non-

contingent universe – a charmed universe (charmed, in the strong sense of the term), a universe of seduction.

Thus the superstitious manipulations surrounding games, which many (Caillois) view only in terms of debasement. The resort to magical practices, from playing one's birth date to looking for recurrent series (the eleven came up eleven times running in Monte Carlo), from the most subtle winning formulas to the rabbit's foot in one's coat pocket, they all feed on the idea that chance does not exist, that the world is built of networks of symbolic relations – not contingent connections, but webs of obligation, webs of seduction. One has only to play one's hand right...

The bettor defends himself at all costs from the idea of a neutral universe, of which objective chance is a part. The bettor claims that anything can be seduced – numbers, letters, or the laws that govern their distribution. *He would seduce the Law itself.* The least sign, the least gesture has a meaning, which is not to say that it is part of some rational progression, but that every sign is vulnerable to, and can be seduced by other signs. The world is held together by unbreakable chains, but they are not those of the Law.

Here lies the “immorality” of games, often attributed to the fact that they encourage one to want to win too much too quickly. But this is to give them too much credit. Games are more immoral than that. They are immoral because they substitute an order of seduction for an order of production.



If a game is a *venture for the seduction of chance* that attaches itself to combinations of signs (but not those of cause and effect, nor those of contingent series) and if games tend to eliminate the objective neutrality of chance and its statistical “liberty” by harnessing them to the form of the duel, the challenge, and orderly bidding – then it is absurd to imagine, as does Gilles Deleuze in *Logique du Sens*, an “ideal game” that would consist of a fury of contingencies and, thus, of a radically increased indeterminacy which, in turn, would give rise to the simultaneous play of every series and, therefore, to the

radical expression of becoming and desire.

The probability that two sequences will never – or hardly ever – cross eliminates the game's very possibility (if sequences never cross one cannot even speak of chance). But so does the likelihood that an indefinite number of sequences will cross each other at any given moment. For games are only conceived from the junction of a few sequences within a time-space frame limited by rules. Indeed, the latter is a condition for the production of chance; the rules do not restrict the freedom of a “total” chance, but constitute the very mode of the game's appearance.

It is not the case that the “more” chance there is, the more intense the game. This is to conceptualize both games and chance in terms of a sort of “freedom” of combination, an imminent drifting, a constant dissociation of orders and sequences, an unbridled improvisation of desire – a kind of *daimôn* who blows in all directions, breathing a little uncertainty, an additional incidence into the world's orderly economy.

Now all this is absurd. Becoming is not a matter of more or less. There is no dose or overdose. Either the world is engaged in a cycle of becoming, and is so engaged at all times, or it is not. At any rate, it makes no sense to “take the side” of becoming, assuming it exists – no more than that of chance, or desire. For one has no choice: “To take the side of the primary process is still a consequence of secondary processes” (Lyotard).

The very idea that games can be intensified by the acceleration of chance (as though one were speaking of the acidic content of a chemical solution), the idea that becoming can thereby be extended exponentially, turns chance into an energizing function, and stems directly from a confusion with the notion of desire. But this is not chance. Perhaps one should even admit, as the bettor secretly postulates, that chance does not exist. Quite a number of cultures have neither the word nor the concept, for they do not view anything in terms of contingency, *nor even in terms of probability*. Only our culture has invented the possibility of a statistical response, an inorganic, objective and fluctuating response, the *dead response* of the phenomena's objective indeterminacy and instability. When one thinks about it, the assumption of a contingent universe,

stripped of all obligations and purged of every symbolic or formal rule, the idea that the world of things is subjected to a molecular and *objective disorder* – the same disorder that is idealized and glorified in the molecular vision of desire – this assumption is insane. Scarcely less demented than the assumption of an *objective order*, of an unbroken chain of cause and effect, which belongs to the glory days of classical reason, and from which, furthermore, the assumption of disorder follows in accord with the logic of residues.

The idea of chance first emerged as the residue of a logical order of determination. But even hypostasized as a revolutionary variable, it still remains the mirror image of the principle of causality. Its generalization, its unconditional “liberation,” as in Deleuze’s “ideal game,” is part of the political and mystical economy of residues at work everywhere today, with its structural inversion of weak into strong terms. Chance, once perceived as obscene and insignificant, is to be revived in its insignificance and so become the motto of a nomadic economy of desire.



Games are not to be confused with “becoming,” they are not nomadic, and do not belong to the realm of desire. They are characterized, even when games of chance, by their capacity to reproduce a given arbitrary constellation in the same terms an indefinite number of times. Their true form is cyclical or recurrent. And as such they, and they alone, put a definite stop to causality and its principle – not by the massive introduction of random series (which results only in the dispersal of causality, its reduction to scattered fragments, and not its overcoming) – but by the potential return (the eternal return if one will) to an orderly, conventional situation.

Neither the temporality of desire and its “freedom,” nor that of some natural development (as with the play of children, or the play of the world described by Heraclitus), but that of the eternal return of a ritual form – and willed as such. Thus each of the game’s sequences delivers us from the linearity of life and death.

There are two kinds of eternal return. The statistical kind – neutral, objective and insipid – where, given that the combinations, however numerous, in a finite system cannot be infinite, probability demands that the same arrangement eventually recur, according to an immense cycle. A thin metaphysics: it is a *natural* eternal return, in accord with a natural, statistical causality. The other vision is tragic and ritual: it is the willed recurrence, as in games, of an arbitrary and non-causal configuration of signs, where each sign seeks out the next relentlessly, as in the course of a ceremonial. It is the eternal return demanded by rules – as in a mandatory succession of throws and wagers. And it makes no difference whether they be the rules of the game of the universe itself: there is no metaphysics looming on the horizon of the game's indefinitely reversible cycle – and certainly not the metaphysics of desire, which is still dependent on the world's natural order, or natural disorder.

Desire may well be the *Law* of the universe, but the eternal return is its rule. Luckily for us – otherwise, where would be the pleasure in playing?



The consummate vertigo induced by a game: when the throw of the dice ends up “eliminating chance,” when, for example, the same number appears against all odds several times in a row. A game’s ultimate fantasy, the ecstasy of checking chance – when, in the grip of a challenge, the same throw is repeated, the prisoner of a recurring series, and as a result the law and chance are abolished. One plays in anticipation of this symbolic transgression, that is to say, in anticipation of an event that *will put an end to a random process without, however, falling prey to an objective law*. By itself each throw produces only a moderate giddiness, but when fate raises the bid – a sign that it is truly caught up in the game – when fate itself seems to throw a challenge to the natural order of things and enters into a frenzy or ritual vertigo, then the passions are unleashed and the spirits seized by a truly deadly fascination.

There is nothing imaginary about this, but an imperious

necessity to put a stop to the natural play of differences as well as the historical development of the law. There is no greater moment. The only way to respond to the natural advances of desire is in terms of the ritual one-upmanship of seduction and games; and the only way to respond to the contractual proposals of the law is in terms of the one-upmanship and formal vertigo of rules. A crystalline passion without equal.



Games do not belong to the realm of fantasy, and their recurrence is not the *répétition* of a phantasy. The latter proceeds from an “other” scene, and is a figure of death. The game’s recurrence proceeds from a rule, and is a figure of seduction and pleasure. Every repetitive figure of meaning, whether affect or representation, is a figure of death. Pleasure is released only by a meaningless recurrence, one that proceeds from neither a conscious order nor an unconscious disorder, but results from the reversion and reiteration of a pure form that challenges and outdoes the law of contents and their accumulation.

The game’s recurrence proceeds directly from fate, and exists as fate. Not as a death drive or tendential lowering of the rate of difference, resulting in the entropic twilights of systems of meaning, but as a form of ritual incantation – a form of ceremonial where the signs, because they are so violently attracted to each other, no longer leave any room for meaning, and can only duplicate themselves. Here too one finds the vertigo of *seduction*, the vertigo that comes of being absorbed in a recurrent fate. All societies other than our own are familiar with this theater of ritual, which is also a theater of cruelty. Games rediscover something of this cruelty. Compared with games, everything real is sentimental. The truth, and the Law itself are sentimental relative to the pure forms of repetition.

Just as it is not liberty that is opposed to the law, but the rule, similarly *it is not indeterminacy that is opposed to causality, but obligation*. The latter is neither a linear chain, nor an unchaining (which is merely the romanticism of a deranged causality); it forms a *reversible chain* that, moving from sign to sign, inexorably completes its cycle, turning its origin into an ellipse

and economizing on its end, like the shells and bracelets in Polynesian exchange relationships. The cycle of obligations is not a code. We have confused obligation in the strong sense, in its timeless, ritual sense, with laws and codes, and their commonplace constraints, which rule over us under the opposite sign, that of liberty.

In Deleuze's pure, nomadic chance, in his "ideal game," there is only disjunction and dispersed causality. But only a conceptual error allows one to dissociate the game from its rules in order to radicalize its utopian form. And the same intemperance, or the same facility, allows one to dissociate chance from what defines it – an objective calculus of series and probabilities – in order to turn it into the theme song for an ideal indeterminacy, an ideal desire composed of the endless occurrence of countless series. But why more series? Why not a pure Brownian movement? But then the latter, though it seems to have become the physical model for radical desire, has its laws, and is not a game.

To generalize chance, in the form of an "ideal game," without simultaneously generalizing the game's rules, is akin to the fantasy of radicalizing desire by ridding it of every law and every lack. The objective idealism of the "ideal game," and the subjective idealism of desire.



A game forms a system with neither contradiction nor internal negativity. That is why one cannot laugh at it. And if it cannot be parodied, it is because its entire organization is parodic. The rule functions as the parodic simulacrum of the law. Neither an inversion nor subversion of the law, but its reversion in simulation. The pleasure of the game is twofold: the invalidation of time and space within the enchanted sphere of an indestructible form of reciprocity – pure seduction – and the parodying of reality, the formal outbidding of the law's constraints.

Can one produce a finer parody of the ethics of value than by submitting oneself, with all the intransigence of virtue, to the outcomes of chance or the absurdity of a rule? Can there be a finer parody of the values of work, economy, production

and calculation than the challenge and the wager, or the fantastic non-equivalence between what is at stake and what might be won (or lost – both being equally immoral)? Or a finer parody of every idea of contract and exchange than this magical complicity, this “duel” obligation relative to the rules, this agonistic attempt to seduce one’s opponent, and to seduce chance itself? What better denial of the values of will, responsibility, equality and justice than this exaltation of (good and bad) luck, this exultation in playing with fate as an equal? Can there be a more beautiful parody of our ideologies of liberty than this passion for rules?

Is there a better parody of “sociality” itself than that found in Borges’ fable, “The Lottery in Babylon,” with its inescapable and fateful logic and its simulation of the social by the game?



“I come from a dizzy land where the lottery is the basis of reality.” Thus begins a story about a society where the lottery has swallowed up all the other institutions. In the beginning it was only a game of plebeian character, and the most one could do was win. But “the lotteries” were boring, since “they were not directed at all of man’s faculties, but only at hope.” One then “tried a reform: the interpolation of a few unfavourable tickets in the list of favourable numbers” – with the risk of paying a considerable fine. This was a radical modification: it eliminated the illusion that the game had an economic purpose. Henceforth one entered a pure game, and the dizziness that seized hold of Babylonian society knew no limits. Anything could happen by drawing lots, the lottery became “secret, free and general,” “every free man automatically participated in the sacred drawings which took place every sixty nights and which determined his destiny until the next drawing.” A lucky draw could make him a rich man or a magi, or give him the women he desired; an unlucky draw could bring him mutilation or death.

In short, the interpolation of chance in all the interstices of the social order and “in the order of the world.” All the lottery’s errors were good, since they only intensified its logic.

Impostures, ruses, and manipulation could be perfectly integrated into the aleatory system: who could say if they were “real,” that is, whether they were the result of some natural or rational causality, or resulted from chance as determined by the lottery? In principle no one. Predestination encompassed everything, *the lottery’s* effects were universal. The Lottery and the Company could cease to exist, their silent functioning would be exercised over a field of *total simulation*. All “reality” had entered the secret decisions of the Company, and there was, in all likelihood, no longer any difference between the real reality and the contingent reality.

Indeed it is possible that the Company never existed, and the world’s order would remain the same. But the assumption of its existence changes everything. The assumption alone is enough to change reality, as it is, as it cannot be otherwise, into one immense simulacrum. Reality is nothing other than its own simulation.

In our “realist” societies, the Company has ceased to exist. Our societies are oblivious to and built on the ruins of this possible total simulation. We are no longer conscious of the spiral of simulation *that preceded reality*. In truth, our unconscious is found here: in our incomprehension before the vertiginous indetermination and simulation that rules the sacred disorder of our lives. Not in the repression of a few affects or representations – our insipid conception of the unconscious – but in our blindness before the Big Game, before the fact that our “real” fate with all its “real” events has already passed through, not some anterior life (though by itself this hypothesis is superior to our metaphysics of objective causes), but a cycle of indetermination, a game cycle that is simultaneously arbitrary and fixed. Borges’ Lottery is the symbolic incarnation of this game, which has given our fate that hallucinatory quality we take for its truth. The logic escapes us, though our consciousness of the real is based on our unconsciousness of simulation.

Remember the Babylonian Lottery. Whether or not it exists, the veil of indetermination it throws over our life is absolute. Its arbitrary decrees rule the least details of our existence. We dare not speak of a hidden infrastructure, for the latter will eventually be called upon to appear as truth – while here it is a mat-

ter of fate, that is, of a game that has always already been worked out, yet remains forever indecipherable.

Borges' originality is to have extended this game to the entire social structure. Where we see games as superstructure, as relatively weightless compared to the good, solid infrastructure of social relations, he has turned the entire edifice upside down and made indetermination into the determinant instance. It is no longer economic reason, that of labour and history, nor the "scientific" determinism of exchanges which determines the social structure and fate of individuals, but a total indeterminism, that of the Game and of Chance. Predestination coincides here with a total mobility, and an arbitrary system with the most radical democracy (the instantaneous exchange of all positions – something to satisfy the present-day's thirst for polyvalence).

This reversal is extremely ironic relative to every contract, every rational foundation of the social. Pacts concerning rules, and concerning their arbitrariness (the Lottery) eliminate the social as we understand it, just as rituals put an end to the law. It has never been otherwise with secret societies; in their efflorescence one should see a resistance to the social.

The nostalgia for a factual, ritual, and contingent sociality, the yearning to be free of the contract and social relation, the longing for a crueler if more fascinating destiny for exchange, is deeper than the rational imperatives of the social with which we have been lulled. Borges' tale is perhaps not a fiction, but a description that comes close to our former dreams, that is to say, to our future as well.

In Byzantium, social life, the political order, its hierarchies and expenditures were regulated by horse races. Today one still bets on the horses, but the mirror of democracy produces only a faint reflection. The enormous amount of money exchanged in betting is nothing compared to the extravagance of the Byzantines, where all public life was tied to equestrian competitions. Still it is symptomatic of the game's importance in many social activities and in the rapid circulation of goods and social positions. In Brazil there is the Jogo de Bicho: betting, lotteries and other games have seized hold of entire sectors of the population who risk their life's savings and status. A distraction from underdevelopment one might claim, but even in its wretched

modern version, it provides an echo of cultures where ludic and sumptuary practices generated the essential forms and structures of exchange – a schema that goes very much against the grain of our own culture, most notably in its Marxist version. Underdeveloped? Only the privileged, those elevated by the social contract, or by their social status – itself only a simulacrum, and one without even the value of a destiny – can judge such aleatory practices as worthless when they are quite superior to their own. For it is as much a challenge to the social as to chance, and indicative of a yearning for a more adventurous world, where one plays with value more recklessly.



## THE DUAL, THE POLAR AND THE DIGITAL

A lottery is a simulacrum – there being nothing more artificial than to regulate the course of events by the absurd decrees of chance. But let us not forget that this is what antiquity did with the arts of divination, using the entrails of chickens and the flight of birds; and isn't it what the modern art of interpretation continues to do, though with fewer grounds? It is all a simulacrum. The difference is that in Borges' *Ficciones* the game's rules completely replace the law and the game decides one's destiny, while in our society games are simply marginal and frivolous diversions.

Compared to Borges' fictional society, based on chance decrees and a type of predestination by the game, relative to such a cruel order where the risks are never-ending and the stakes absolute, we live in a society of minimal stakes and risks. If the terms were not contradictory, one could say that security has become our destiny. It might be the case, moreover, that this outcome will be fatal for our society – the mortality of over-protected species which, in their domestication, are dying of too much security.

Now if the Babylonians succumbed to the lottery's vertigo, it was because there was something in the lottery that completely seduced them, that enabled them to challenge everything worth existing, including their own existence – and their

own death. By contrast, for us the social is without seduction. What is less seductive than the very idea of the social? The degree zero of seduction. Even God never fell so low.

Relative to the dangers of seduction that haunt the universe of games and rituals, our own sociality and the forms of communication and exchange it institutes, appear in direct proportion to their secularization under the sign of the Law, as extremely impoverished, banal and abstract.

But this is still only an intermediary state, for the age of the Law has passed, and with it that of the *socius* and the social contract. Not only are we no longer living in an era of rules and rituals, we are no longer living in an era of laws and contracts. We live today according to Norms and Models, and we do not even have a term to designate that which is replacing sociality and the social.

the RULE  
Ritual(ity)

the LAW  
Social(ity)

the NORM  
???????

We are presently living with a minimum of real sociality and a maximum of simulation. Simulation neutralizes the poles that organize the perspectival space of the real and the Law, while draining off the energy potential that still drives the space of the Law and the social. In the era of models, one must speak of the deterrence of the antagonistic strategies that gave the Law and the social their stakes – including a stake in their transgression. No more transgression, and no more transcendence. But for all that, we are no longer in the tragic immanence of rules and rituals, but in the cool immanence of norms and models. Deterrence, regulation, feed-back, sequences of tactical elements in a non-referential space... But above all, in this age of models, the digitality of the signal as a replacement for the polarity of the sign.

DUALITY

POLARITY

DIGITALITY

These three logics are exclusive of each other:  
– the *dual relation* dominates the game, the ritual and the entire sphere of the rule.

- the *polar relation*, or the dialectical or contradictory relation, organizes the universe of the Law, the social and meaning.
- the *digital relation* (but it is no longer a “relation” – let us speak instead of the digital connection) allocates the space of Norms and Models.

In the cross-play of these three logics, the concept of seduction in its radical sense (as duel, ritualistic, agonistic, with the stakes maximized) must be replaced by seduction in its “soft” sense – the seduction of an “ambience,” or the playful eroticization of a universe without stakes.



## THE “LUDIC” AND COLD SEDUCTION

*For we are living off seduction  
but will die in fascination.*

The play of models with their ever-changing combinations, is characteristic of a ludic universe, where everything operates as possible simulation, where everything, in the absence of a God to acknowledge his creations, can act as counter-evidence. Subversive values have only to wait their turn, and violence and critique are themselves presented as models. We are living in a supple, curved universe, that no longer has any vanishing points. Formerly the reality principle was defined in terms of the coherence of objects and their use, functions and their institution, things and their objective determination – today the pleasure principle is defined in terms of the conjunction of desires and models (of a demand and its anticipation by simulated responses).

The “ludic” is formed of the “play” of the model with the demand. But given that the demand is prompted by the model, and the model’s precession is absolute, challenges are impossible. Most of our exchanges are regulated by game strategies; but the latter, defined as a capacity to foresee all of one’s opponent’s moves and check them in advance, renders all stakes impossible. Game theory describes the ludic character of a world

where, paradoxically, nothing is at stake.

The "Werbung," the solicitation of advertisements and polls, all the models of the media and politics, no longer claim credence, only credibility. They are no longer objects of libidinal investment; for they are made selectively available within a range of choices – with leisure itself now appearing, relative to work, as just another channel on the screen of time (and will there soon be a third or fourth channel?). American television, one might add, with its 83 channels is the living incarnation of the ludic: one can no longer do anything but play – change channels, mix programs and create one's own montage (the predominance of TV games is merely an echo, at the level of content, of this ludic employment of the medium). And like every combinatorial, it is a source of fascination. But one can no longer speak of a sphere of enchantment or seduction; instead, an era of fascination is beginning.

Obviously, the ludic cannot be equated with having fun. With its propensity for making connections, the ludic is more akin to detective work. More generally, it connotes networks and their mode of functioning, the forms of their permeation and manipulation. The ludic encompasses all the different ways one can "play" with networks, not in order to establish alternatives, but to discover their state of optimal functioning.

We have already witnessed the debasement of play to the level of function – in play therapy, play school, play-as-catharsis and play-as-creativity. Throughout the fields of education and child psychology, play has become a "vital function" or necessary phase of development. Or else it has been grafted onto the pleasure principle to become a revolutionary alternative, a dialectical overcoming of the reality principle in Marcuse, an ideology of play and the festival for others. But even as transgression, spontaneity, or aesthetic disinterestedness, play remains only a sublimated form of the old, directive pedagogy that gives it a meaning, assigns it an end, and thereby purges it of its power of seduction. Play as dreaming, sport, work, rest or as a transitional object – or as the physical hygiene necessary for psychological equilibrium or for a system's regulation or evolution. The very opposite of that passion for illusion which once characterized it.

We are still speaking, however, of *functional* attempts to subject play to the law of value. What is more serious is the *cybernetic* absorption of play into the general category of the ludic.



The general evolution of games is revealing: from competitive games – team sports, old-fashioned card games, or even table football – to the generation of pinball machines (which already had screens but were not yet “televised,” a mixture of electronics and hand movements), now rendered obsolete by electronic tennis and other computerized games, their screens streaked with high-speed molecules. And the atomistic manipulation required by the latter is not to be distinguished from the practices of information control in the “labour process” or the future employment of computers in the domestic sphere, which were also preceded by television and other audiovisual aids. The ludic is everywhere, even in the “choice” of a brand of laundry detergent in the supermarket. Without too much effort one sees similarities with the world of psychotropic drugs: for the latter too is ludic, being nothing but the manipulation of a sensorial keyboard or neuronic instrument panel. Electronic games are a soft drug – one plays them with the same somnambular absence and tactile euphoria.

Even the genetic code appears as a command keyboard for the living, on which are played the infinitesimal combinations and variations that determine their “destiny” – a “tele”-onomic destiny that unfolds on the molecular screen of the code. Much can be said about the objectivity of the genetic code that serves as a “biological” prototype for the entire universe, this combinatory, aleatory and ludic universe that now surrounds us. After all, what is “biology”? What is this truth it possesses? Or is it that it possesses *only* truth... destiny transformed into an operational instrument panel. Behind the screen of biological remote control, there is no longer any play – no stakes, illusions, or representations. It is simply a matter of modulating the code, playing with it as one plays with the tonalities and timbres of a stereophonic system.

The latter is a good example of the ludic. When manipulat-

ing the stereo's controls, one's concerns are no longer musical but technological: the optimal modulation of the system's range. With the magic of the console and instrument panel, the manipulation of the medium predominates.

Consider a game of computer chess. Where is the intensity of the game of chess, or the pleasure proper to computers? The one involves play, the other the ludic. The same applies to a soccer match that has been televised. Don't think that they are the same match: one is hot, the other cool – one is a game, with its emotional charge, its bravado and choreography, the other is tactile, modulated (play-backs, close-ups, sweeps, slow motion shots, different angles of vision, etc.). The televised match is, above all else, a televised event, like the *Holocaust* or the war in Vietnam, and is barely distinguishable from the latter. Thus the introduction of colour television in the United States, which had been slow and difficult, only took off when one of the major networks decided to introduce colour to televised journalism. It was the period of the war in Vietnam, and studies have shown that the "play" of colours, and the technical sophistication borne by this innovation, rendered the images of war more bearable to the viewing public. The "more" truth, the greater the ludic distanciation from the event.



#### The *Holocaust*, the television special.

The Jews are no longer forced to pass through the gas chambers and crematorium ovens, but through the sound track and picture strip, the cathodic screen and microprocessor. The amnesia, the oblivion, thereby finally attains an aesthetic dimension – consummated in retrospective and retrogressive fashion, raised here to mass dimensions. Television as the event's true "final solution."

The dimension of history that once remained in the shadows as guilt, no longer exists, since now "the whole world knows," the whole world has been shaken – a sure sign that "it" will never happen again. In effect, what is exorcized at the cost of only a few tears will not happen again, because it is now recurring, and in the very form of its alleged denunciation, the very

medium of its alleged exorcism – television. The same forgetfulness, the same liquidation, extermination, and even annihilation of memory and history – the same recessive irradiation, the same echoless absorption, the same black hole as Auschwitz. And one would have us believe that television is going to release us from the burden of Auschwitz by raising collective consciousness, when television perpetuates it in other ways, no longer under the auspices of a place of annihilation, but of a medium of dissuasion.

The *Holocaust* is, *first of all* (and exclusively) a *televised* event (one must not forget McLuhan's basic rule). That is, it is an attempt to reheat a tragic but *cold* historical event, the first great event of the cold systems, the cooling systems, the systems of dissuasion and extermination which would then be deployed in other forms (including the Cold War, etc.) – and an event that concerns cold masses (the Jews no longer implicated, but in the end forced to manage their own death, the masses no longer rebellious – dissuaded by death, dissuaded unto death). A cold event warmed up by a cold medium for masses, themselves cold, who are going to experience only a posthumous emotion, a tactile and dissuasive shudder that will enable them to let the catastrophe slip into oblivion with a sort of aesthetic good conscience.

In order to reheat all this, the political and pedagogical orchestration that followed the (televised) event in an attempt to give it meaning was not excessive. The panic before the program's possible consequences on the minds of children; all those social workers mobilized to filter it, as if this artificial resurrection carried a danger of contagion! In fact, the danger was quite the opposite: that resulting from the social inertia of cold systems – cold producing cold. Thus the whole world had to be mobilized in order to reconstitute the social (warmth) of communication out of the cold monster of extermination. The program served to capture the artificial warmth of a dead event in order to reheat the dead body of the social. Hence the supplementary contributions of the other media attempting to extend the program's effects by its feed-back: the concurrent polls seconding the program's enormous, collective impact – when, needless to say, these polls only verified the televisual success of the medium itself.



One should speak of television's cold light, and why it is inoffensive to the imagination (including the imagination of children). It is innocuous because it no longer conveys an imaginary, for the simple reason that *it is no longer an image*. Here it contrasts with the cinema which (though increasingly contaminated by television) is still endowed with an intense imaginary – because it is an image. This is not simply to speak of film as a mere screen or visual form, but as a *myth*, something that still resembles a double, a mirror, a fantasy, a dream, etc. None of this in the TV image. It doesn't suggest anything, it mesmerizes... It is only a screen or, better, it is a miniaturized terminal that immediately appears in your head (you are the screen and the television is watching you), transistorizes all your neurons and passes for a magnetic tape – a tape, not an image.



All this belongs to the ludic realm where one encounters a *cold seduction* – the "narcissistic" spell of electronic and information systems, the cold attraction of the terminals and mediums that we have become, surrounded as we are by consoles, isolated and seduced by their manipulation.

The possibility of modulations within an undifferentiated universe and of the "play" of unstable sets of elements, is never without fascination. It is even highly possible that ludic and libinal flirt with each other somewhere in the direction of random systems, by virtue of a desire that no longer leads to *infractions* in the legal sense, but entails *diffraction* in all senses within a universe that no longer knows the legal sphere. This desire also belongs to the ludic realm with its topology of shifting systems, and is *an added source of pleasure* (or anguish) for each of the particles moving within the networks. We are all accorded this light, psychedelic giddiness which results from multiple or successive connections and disconnections. We are all invited to become miniaturized "game systems," i.e., microsystems with the potential to regulate their own random functioning.

This is the modern meaning of play, the "ludic" sense, connoting the suppleness and polyvalence of combinations. Understood in this sense, "play," its very possibility, is at the basis of the metastability of systems. It has nothing to do with play as a dual or agonistic relation; it is the cold seduction that governs the spheres of information and communication. And it is in this cold seduction that the social and its representations are now wearing themselves thin.

We are all quite familiar with this immense process of simulation. Non-directive interviews, call-in shows, all-out participation – the extortion of speech: "It concerns you, you are the majority, you are what's happening." And the probing of opinions, hearts, minds, and the unconscious to show how much "it" speaks. The news has been invaded by this phantom content, this homeopathic transplant, this waking dream of communication. A circular construction where one presents the audience with what it wants, an integrated circuit of perpetual solicitation. The immense energies spent in maintaining this simulacrum at arm's length, to avoid the brutal dis-simulation that would occur should the reality of a radical loss of meaning become too evident.

Seduction/simulacrum: communication as the functioning of the social within a closed circuit, where signs duplicate an undiscoverable reality. The social contract has become a "simulation pact" sealed by the media and the news. And nobody, one might add, is completely taken in: the news is experienced as an ambience, a service, or hologram of the social. The masses respond to the simulation of meaning with a kind of reverse simulation; they respond to dissuasion with disaffection, and to illusions with an enigmatic belief. It all moves around, and can give the impression of an operative seduction. But such seduction has no more meaning than anything else, seduction here connotes only a kind of ludic adhesion to simulated pieces of information, a kind of tactile attraction maintained by the models.



"Tele-phathics."

"Rogers here – I am receiving you five on five." "Do you hear me? Yes, I hear you." "We receive you, come in." "Yes, we are speaking." This is the litany of the radio bands, particularly the alternative or pirate stations. One plays at speaking and listening; one plays at communication using the most sophisticated technology for the latter's *mise en scène*. The phatic function of language, used to establish contact and sustain speech's formal dimension: this function first isolated and described by Malinowski with reference to the Melanesians, then by Jakobson in his grid of language's functions, becomes hypertrophied in the tele-dimension of the communications networks. Contact for contact's sake becomes the empty form with which language seduces itself when it no longer has anything to say.

The latter concerns our own culture. What Malinowski described was something quite different: a symbolic altercation or duel of words. By these ritual phrases and palavers without content, the natives were still throwing a challenge and offering a gift, as in a pure ceremonial. Language has no need for "contact": it is *we* who need communication to have a specific "contact" function, precisely because it is eluding us. That is why Jakobson was able to isolate it in his analysis of language, while both the concept and the terms to express it are absent from other cultures. Jakobson's grid and his axiomatics of communication are contemporaneous with a change in language's fortune – it is beginning to no longer communicate anything. It has thus become urgent to analytically restore the functional possibility of communication, and in particular the "phatic" function that, in logical terms, is a simple truism: if it speaks, then it speaks. But in effect it no longer speaks, and the discovery of the "phatic" function is symptomatic of the need to inject contact, establish connections, and speak tirelessly simply in order to render language possible. A desperate situation where even simple contact appears wondrous.

If the phatic has become hypertrophied in all our communications systems (i.e., within the media and information processing systems), it is because tele-distance ensures that speech literally no longer has any meaning. One says that one is speaking, but by speaking one is only verifying the network and the

fact that one is linked up with it. There is not even an "other" at the other end, for in a simple reciprocation of signals of recognition there is no longer an identifiable transmitter or receiver, but simply two terminals. The one terminal's signal to the other is merely an indication that something is going through and that, therefore, nothing is happening. Perfect dissuasion.

Two terminals do not two interlocutors make. In "tele" space (the following also holds true for television), there are no longer any *determinate terms* or positions. Only *terminals* in a position of *ex-termination*. It is here, moreover, that Jakobson's entire grid falls apart, for its validity is restricted to the classic configuration of discourse and communication. The grid loses its meaning when applied to networks where pure "digitality" reigns. In discourse there is still a polarity of terms, distinctive oppositions that regulate the advent of meaning. A structure, syntax and space of difference, still regulate dialogue, as implied by the sign (signifier/signified) and the message (transmitter/receiver), etc. But the 0/1 of binary or digital systems is no longer a distinctive opposition or established difference. It is a "bit," the smallest unit of electronic impulse – *no longer a unit of meaning*, but an identificatory pulse. It is no longer language, but its radical dissuasion. This is what the matrix of information and communication is like, and how the networks function. The need for "contact" is most cruelly felt, for not only is there no duel relation as with the Melanesian's linguistic potlach, but there is no longer even the inter-individual logic of exchange found in classical language (that of Jakobson). Discursive duality and polarity have been succeeded by the digitality of data processing. The total ascendancy of the media and networks. The cold elevation of the electronic media, and of the mass itself as medium.

TELE: there are no longer anything but terminals. AUTO: each person is his or her own terminal. ('Tele' and "auto" can themselves be seen as working pieces or commuting particles that are connected to words, like a video is connected to a group of people, or television to those watching it). The group with a video camera is itself its own terminal. It records, adjusts and manages itself electronically. It turns itself on, seduces itself. The group is seduced and even eroticized by the instantane-

ous report it has of itself. Soon self-management will be universal, the province of every person, group and terminal. Self-seduction will become the norm of all the charged particles in the networks or systems.

The body itself, operated by remote control from the genetic code, is itself no more than its own terminal; it has no other concern than the optimal self-management of its memory banks.

Pure magnetization – that of the response by the question, the real by the model, the 0 by the 1, the network by its very existence, the speakers by their mere connection, the pure tactility of the signal, the sheer virtue of “contact,” the total affinity of one terminal for another: this is the image of seduction, scattered and diffused throughout all our current systems. A self-seduction/self-management that simply reflects the networks’ circularity, and the shortcircuiting of each of their atoms or particles. (Some might speak here of narcissism, and why not? If only because one should not transpose terms like narcissism and seduction to a register that does not concern them, that of *simulation*).

Thus according to Jean Querzola in “Le silicium fleur de peau” (*Traverses*, no. 14/15): psychobiological technology – all the computer prosthesis and self-adjusting electronic networks we possess – provides us with a kind of strange bioelectronic mirror, in which each person, like some digital narcissus, is going to slide along the trajectory of a death drive and sink in his or her own image. Narcissus = narcosis (McLuhan had already made the connection):

Electronic narcosis: it is the ultimate risk of digital simulation... We would slip from Oedipus to Narcissus... At the end of the self-management of our bodies and pleasures there would be a slow narcissistic narcosis. In a word, with silicon, what happens to the reality principle? I am not saying that the world’s digitalization will soon put an end to Oedipus. I am noting that the development of biology and information technology is accompanied by the dissolution of the personality structure we call Oedipal. The dissolution of these

structures uncovers another region, where the father is absent: it has to do with the maternal, the oceanic feeling and the death drive. It is not a neurosis that threatens, but something of the order of a psychosis. A pathological narcissism... We believe that we understand the forms of the social bond built on Oedipus. But when the latter no longer functions, what will power do? After authority, seduction?

The finest example of this "bionic mirror" and "narcissistic necrosis" is cloning, the extreme form of self-seduction: from the Same to the Same without going through the Other.

In the United States a child might be born in the same way as a geranium, by taking cuttings. The first child-clone – genealogy by vegetative multiplication. The first child born from the single cell of an individual, his "father," the sole parent, of which he will be the exact copy, the perfect twin, the double (D. Rorvik, "A son image: la copie d'un homme"). Infinite human propagation by cuttings, with each cell of an individuated organism capable of becoming the matrix for an identical individual.

My genetic inheritance was fixed once and for all when a certain spermatozoid met a certain ovary. This inheritance bears the formula for all the biochemical processes that have created me and ensure my functioning. A copy of this formula is inscribed in each of the tens of billions of cells that constitute me. Each of them knows my makeup; before being a cell of my liver or blood, it is a cell of me. It is therefore theoretically possible to construct an individual identical to myself from any one of them. (Pr. A. Jacquard)

Projection and internment in the mirror of the genetic code. There is no better prosthesis than D.N.A., no finer narcissistic extension than that new image bestowed on modern beings in place of their specular image: their molecular formula. Here is where one will find one's "truth" – in the indefinite repeti-

tion of one's "real," biological being. This narcissism, whose source is no longer a mirror but a formula, is a monstrous parody of the myth of Narcissus. A cold narcissism, a cold self-seduction, without even that minimal distance necessary for the experience of oneself as an illusion. The materialization of the real, biological double in the clone cuts short the possibility of playing with one's own image and, thereby, playing with one's own death.

The double is an imaginary figure that, like the soul or one's shadow, or one's image in a mirror, haunts the subject with a faint death that has to be constantly warded off. If it materializes, death is imminent. This fantastic proposition is now literally realized in cloning. The clone is the very image of death, but without the symbolic illusion that once gave it its charm.

Something of the subject's intimacy with himself rests on the immateriality of his double, on the fact that it is and remains a phantasy. One can and must dream throughout one's life of the perfect duplication or multiplication of one's being, but it remains a dream, and is destroyed when one tries to make it real. The same holds for the primal scene or that of seduction: they too only work when recalled and fantasized, never when real. It was up to our period to try and materialize this phantasy – like so many others – and by way of total confusion, change the play with one's double from a subtle exchange with death and the other into an eternity of the same.

The dream of eternal twins as a substitute for sexual reproduction. A cellular dream of schizogenesis – the surest form of parenthood, since it finally allows one to bypass the other, and go from the same to the same (one will still require a woman's uterus, and a hollowed out ovum, but these aids are short-lived and anonymous – any female prosthesis will do). A mono-cellular utopia that, by way of genetics, will enable complex beings to attain the destiny of protozoa.

Is there a death drive that pushes sexed beings towards a form of reproduction anterior to their acquisition of sexual identities – (moreover, doesn't this fissiparous form, this proliferation by contiguity conjure up death in the deepest recesses of our imaginary – as something that denies sexuality and seeks to annihilate it, the latter being the bearer of life and therefore

a critical and mortal form of reproduction?) – and that simultaneously pushes them to deny all alterity so that they need no longer strive for anything but the perpetuation of an identity, the transparency of a genetic code all the more dedicated to procreation?

Let us leave the death drive. Perhaps we are dealing with a fantasy of self-engendering? But no, for the subject might dream of eliminating the parental figures and even substituting himself for them, but he cannot eliminate the symbolic structure of procreation: when one becomes one's own child, one is still the child of someone. Cloning by contrast, abolishes not just the Mother, but the Father, the crossing of their genes, the immixture of their differences, and above all the duel act that engendering supposes. The person cloned does not engender himself: he comes to bud from a segment. One might speculate on the wealth of these plant-like branchings that dissolve Oedipal sexuality in favour of an “non-human” sex – but the fact remains that both the Father and Mother have disappeared, and in favour of a *matrix/code* [the word “*matrice*” means both “matrix” and “womb”]. No more mother, just a matrix. And henceforth it is the matrix of the genetic code that will “give birth” without end in an operative manner purged of all contingent sexuality.

Nor can one speak any longer of a subject, since the identitarian reduplication puts an end to its division. The mirror stage is abolished, or rather parodied in monstrous fashion, marking the end of the age-old dream of the subject's narcissistic projection. For the latter still supposes a mirror, the mirror in which the subject alienates himself in order to find himself, or stares at himself only to see his own death. But here there is no mirror: an industrial object within a series does not “mirror” the identical object that succeeds it. The one is never a mirage, an ideal or danger for the other. At most such objects can be added up, for they have not been engendered sexually and are not aware of death.

A segment does not require the mediation of the imaginary for its reproduction – no more than an earthworm. Each segment of a worm is reproduced directly as the complete worm – each cell of an American industrialist can give rise to a new

industrialist. Just as each fragment of a hologram can become a matrix of the complete hologram; all the information being contained in each of the scattered fragments.

The same logic marks the end of the concept of totality. If all the information can be found in each of the parts, the whole loses its meaning. It also marks the end of the body, of this singular being we call the body, this singular configuration that cannot be segmented into additional cells, as witnessed by the fact of sexuality. Paradoxically, cloning will fabricate sexed beings in perpetuity, since they will resemble their models, even as the sex organs lose their function. But then sex is not a function, for it exceeds all the body's parts and functions. Indeed, it exceeds all the data that can be obtained about the body, which the genetic code claims to collect. This is why the latter can only clear the way to a type of autonomous reproduction, independent of sex and death.



The bio-physio-anatomical sciences had already begun the analytical decomposition of the body with its dissection into organs and functions. Micro-molecular genetics is its logical consequence at a much higher level of abstraction and simulation: the nuclear level of the command cell, the directive level of the genetic code around which this entire phantasmagoria is organized.

In the mechanistic vision we can still speak of "traditional" simulation, each organ being only a partial and differentiated prosthesis. In the bio-cybernetic vision, the smallest undifferentiated element, the cell becomes an embryonic prosthesis of the entire body. The formula inscribed in each cell becomes the true modern prosthesis of all bodies. For if a prosthesis is generally an artifact that replaces a failing organ, or an instrumental prolongation of the body, then the DNA molecule that contains all the data relative to a living being, is the prosthesis *par excellence*, since it will allow that being to prolong itself indefinitely. In truth, it will become nothing more than the indefinite series of its cybernetic avatars.

We are speaking of a prosthesis even more artificial than any

mechanical prosthesis. For the genetic code is not "natural." Whenever a part is abstracted from the whole and rendered autonomous, it alters the whole by substituting itself for it (prosthesis – this is its etymological meaning). In this sense one can say that the genetic code, which claims to condense an entire living being because it contains all the latter's "data" (genetic simulation is incredibly violent) is an artifact, an artificial matrix, a simulation matrix, from which will proceed, no longer by reproduction, but by pure and simple repetition, identical beings assigned to the same commands.



Cloning is, therefore, the ultimate state of the body's simulation, where the individual, reduced to an abstract genetic formula, is destined to serial multiplication. Walter Benjamin said that in the age of mechanical reproduction the work of art loses its "aura," the unique quality of its here and now, its aesthetic form: it is no longer destined for seduction but reproduction, and in its new destiny, takes on a *political* form. The original is lost, and only nostalgia can restore its "authenticity." The extreme form of this process is to be found in our contemporary mass media, where there never was an original, things being conceived from the start in terms of their unlimited reproducibility.

This is exactly what happens to human beings with cloning. This is what happens to the body when conceived only as informational stock, or as data to be processed. Nothing then prevents its serial reproduction in the same terms Benjamin used when speaking of industrial objects or images. The genetic model has precedence over all possible bodies.

Behind this reversal lies the incursion of a technology that Benjamin had already described as a total medium – an enormous prosthesis for the generation of identical and indistinguishable *objects* and images – but without yet conceiving of the current deepening of this technology, which makes possible the generation of identical *beings*, without any possible return to an original being. The prostheses of the industrial age were still external, *exotechnical* – while those that we are coming

to know have branched out and been interiorized: *esotechnical*.

We live in an age of soft technologies, of genetic and mental software. The prosthesis of the industrial age, its machines, still paid heed to the body in order to modify its image – and were themselves metabolized in an imaginary, this metabolism becoming part of the body's image. But when simulation reaches the point of no return, when the prosthesis infiltrate the body's anonymous, micro-molecular core, when they force themselves on the body as its matrix, and burn out all the succeeding symbolic circuits such that all future bodies will be only its immutable repetition – then the body and its history have come to an end, the individual being no more than the *cancerous metastasis of his basic formula*.

Is not the cloning of individuals from an individual X similar to the proliferation of a single cell one identifies with cancer? There is a close relation between the concept of the genetic code and the pathology of cancer. The code designates the minimal formula to which one can reduce an individual such that he can (and can only) be repeated, while with cancer the same type of cell proliferates without concern for the organic laws of the whole. Thus with cloning one witnesses the repetition of the Same, the proliferation of a single matrix. Formerly sexual reproduction prevented this, but today one can finally isolate the genetic matrix of identity, and eliminate all the differential vicissitudes that gave individuals their aleatory charm. Or their seductiveness.

The metastasis that began with industrial objects ends in cellular organization. Cancer is the disease that dominates contemporary pathology, because it is *the very form of the code's virulence*: the aggravated redundancy of the same cells, or the same signals.



Cloning is very much in keeping with the irreversible tendency to “extend and deepen the system's internal transparency by increasing its possibilities of self-regulation and modifying its informational economy” (Querzola).

All drives will be expelled. Everything interior (networks,

functions, organs, conscious or unconscious circuits) will be exteriorized in the form of prosthesis that will constitute an ideal corpus orbiting around the body, but with the latter as its own satellite. Every nucleus will be enucleated and projected into spatial orbit.

The clone is the materialization of the genetic formula in human form. But it will not stop there. All the body's secrets – sex, anguish, even the subtle pleasures derived from mere existence – everything that you do not, and do not want to know about yourself, will be turned into bio-feed-back, and returned to you in the form of "built-in" digital information. It is the *bionic mirror stage* (Querzola).

A digital Narcissus instead of a triangular Oedipus. The hypostasis of the artificial double, the clone will be your guardian angel, the visible form of your unconscious and the flesh of your flesh, *not metaphorically but literally*. Your "fellow creature" will henceforth be the clone with its hallucinatory resemblance, such that you will never be alone, and will never have any secrets. "Love your neighbour as yourself" – the difficulties of living the Gospel will be resolved. Your neighbour *is yourself*. Love is therefore total. Total self-seduction.



The masses themselves form a clone-like apparatus that functions without the mediation of the other. In the last analysis, the masses are simply the sum of all the systems' terminals – a network travelled by digital impulses (this is what forms a mass). Oblivious to external injunctions, they constitute themselves into integrated circuits given over to manipulation (self-manipulation) and "seduction" (self-seduction).

In truth, nobody any longer knows how a representational apparatus works, or even if it still exists. Still, it is becoming increasingly urgent to rationalize possible occurrences in the universe of simulation. What happens between an absent, hypothetical pole of power and the neutral, elusive pole formed by the masses? The answer: seduction. Things work by seduction.

But such seduction suggests the workings of a social world

that we no longer comprehend, and a political world whose structures have faded. In place of the latter, seduction gives rise to an immense blank area traversed by tepid currents of speech, or a malleable network lubricated by magnetic impulses. The world is no longer driven by power, but fascination, no longer by production, but seduction. This seduction is, however, no more than an empty declaration formed of simulated concepts. The discourses held by both the "strategists" of mass desire (the politicians, advertisers, organizers, engineers of the soul, and of the mind, etc.) and the "analysts" of their strategies, these discourses that describe the functioning of the social or the political, or what remains of them, in terms of seduction, they are as vacuous as the political space itself. They simply refract the emptiness of that about which they speak. "The media seduce the masses," "the masses seduce themselves" – the use of the word seduction here is incredibly shallow and hackneyed. Corrupted of its literal meaning, which implies charm and mortal enchantment, the term comes to signify the social and technical lubrication required for smooth relations – a smooth semiurgy, a soft technology. The term then has an "ecological" connotation, and marks the passage from hard to soft energies. Soft energy, soft seduction. The social made scarce.



With this diffuse, tensile form of seduction, one is no longer speaking of the aristocratic seduction of duel relations. One is speaking of a seduction reviewed and revised by the ideology of desire. A psychologized seduction that results from its vulgarization with the rise in the West of the imaginary figure of desire.

This figure does not belong to the masters, but was historically produced by the oppressed under the sign of their liberation, and has been deepened by the failure of successive revolutions. As a form, desire marks the passage from their status as objects to that of subjects, but this passage is itself only a more refined, interiorized perpetuation of their servitude. The first glimmerings of mass subjectivity at the dawn of modern and revolutionary times – the first glimmerings of the fact that the masses were subjects and could manage their own servi-

tude under the sign of their own desires! Large-scale seduction now begins. For if an object can simply be dominated, the subject of desire, by contrast, has to be seduced.

This soft strategy will spread, socially and historically. The masses will be psychologized in order to be seduced; they will be rigged up with desires in order to be distracted. Yesterday they had a (mystified!) consciousness and were alienated – today they have an unconscious and (repressed and corrupted) desires and are seduced. Yesterday they were diverted from the (revolutionary) truth of history – today they are diverted from the truth of their own desires. The poor, seduced and manipulated masses! Where once they had to endure domination under the threat of violence, now they must accept it by dint of seduction.



Speaking more generally, the theoretical hallucination of desire, with its diffuse libidinal psychology, serves as a backdrop to that simulacrum of seduction which one now finds everywhere. Having replaced the world of surveillance, it characterizes the vulnerability of both individuals and masses to soft injunctions. Distilled in homeopathic doses throughout all personal and social relations, the seductive shadow of this discourse hovers today over the desert of social relations, and of power itself.

In this sense, we truly live in an era of seduction. But we can no longer speak of that form of absorption or potential engulfment, that fateful distraction from which no one or no “reality” can ever be completely safe (perhaps there is no longer enough reality to deflect, nor truth to subvert). Nor even of the corruption of innocence or virtue (there is no longer sufficient morality – or perversion – for that). All that remains is to seduce in order to seduce? “Seduce me.” “Let me seduce you.” It is the seduction that remains when all the stakes have been withdrawn. We are no longer speaking about a violence committed against meaning or about its silent extermination, but about what is left to language when it no longer has anything to say. No longer a vertiginous loss, but the minimalist form of mutu-

al gratification two linguistic beings can give each other in an enervated social relation. "Seduce me." "Let me seduce you."

In this sense, seduction is everywhere, surreptitiously or openly, blending in with the ambiance, the constant solicitations, with exchange pure and simple. It is the seduction of student and teacher (I am seducing you and you are seducing me, there being nothing else to do), of the politician and his public, of power (ah, the seduction of power and the power of seduction!), of the analyst and the analysand, etc.

The Jesuits were already famous for having used seduction in a religious guise, for having returned the throngs to the bosom of the Catholic church by the worldly and aesthetic seduction of the baroque, and having recaptured the consciences of the powerful by the expedient of fancy goods and fancy women. In effect, the Jesuits provide the first modern example of the elaboration of a strategy of mass desire and a society of mass seduction. And they were relatively successful. It is entirely possible that, once the austere charms of political economy and producer capitalism – capitalism's puritan cycle – have been swept away, a catholic and Jesuitical era will begin, with a soft technology of seduction and a soft, rosy semiurgy.

It is no longer a matter of seduction as passion, but of a *demand for seduction*. Of an invocation of desire and its realization in place of the faltering relations of power and knowledge that inhere in love and transference. What happens to the master-slave dialectic when the master has been seduced by the slave, and the slave by the master? Seduction becomes no more than an effusion of differences or a discursive libidinal striptease. With a vague collusion between supply and demand, *seduction becomes nothing more than an exchange value*, serving the circulation of exchanges and the lubrication of social relations.

What remains of the enchantment of that labyrinthine structure within which one could lose oneself? What is left of seduction's imposture? "There is another type of violence, which has neither its name nor outward appearance, but which is no less dangerous. I am speaking of seduction" (Rollin). Traditionally, the seducer was an impostor who employed subterfuge and villainy to achieve his ends – or at least who *believed* he was employing them. For the other, by allowing herself to be seduced,

by succumbing to the imposture, often voided it, stripped the seducer of his control. In effect, he falls into his own trap for having failed to consider seduction's reversible power.

The following always holds: the one who seeks to please the other has already succumbed to the other's charms. On this basis, an entire religion or culture can be organized around *relations of seduction* (as opposed to relations of production). Thus the Greek gods – seducers/impostors – used their power to seduce men, but were seduced in turn, and indeed were often reduced to seducing men, this being their main task. Thus they provided the image of a world order ruled not by laws, as in the Christian universe or political economy, but by a mutual seduction that ensured the *symbolic* equilibrium between gods and men.

What remains of this violence trapped by its own artifice? That universe where gods and men sought to please each other – even by the violent seduction of sacrifice – has ended. As has the secret understanding of signs and analogies that provided magic with its power of enchantment. And with it, the assumption that the entire world is susceptible to seduction and reversible in signs – not just the gods, but inanimate beings, things, and the dead themselves who have always had to be seduced, bewitched and cast out with the aid of numerous signs and rituals, lest they do any harm. Today one has to work through one's own mourning, an individual and eerie task of reorientation and redeployment. We now live in a universe of forces and relations of force, a universe that has materialized as in a void, an object of mastery and not seduction. A universe of production, investments, counter-investments and the liberation of energies, a universe of the Law and objective laws, a universe of the master-slave dialectic.

Sexuality itself arose within this universe as one of its objective functions, and now tends to overdetermine all the others, substituting itself as an alternative finality for those that are disappearing or already defunct. Everything is sexualized and thereby acquires something of a terrain for adventure and play. Everywhere the id speaks. Every discourse appears as an eternal commentary on sex and desire. In this sense, one might say that they have all become discourses of seduction, discourses

that register an explicit demand for seduction, but a soft seduction, whose weakened condition has become synonymous with so much else in this society – the ambience, the manipulation, the persuasion, the gratification, the strategies of desire, the mystique of personal relations, the libidinal economy and its smoothed over relations of transference which relays the competitive economy and its relations of force. This seduction, which permeates the entire expanse of language, has no more substance or sense than the power that pervades all the interstices of the social network. This is why they are able to combine their discourses so easily. The degenerated metalanguage of seduction combined with the degenerated metalanguage of politics is everywhere operative (or if one will, is absolutely non-operative). It is enough that there be a consensus concerning the *model of seduction's simulation*, the diffuse stream of speech and desire – just as the murky metalanguage of participation suffices to safeguard an appearance of sociality.



The discourse of simulation is not an imposture. It has only to have seduction act as a simulacrum of affect, desire, or libidinal investment, in a world where the need for these is cruelly felt. However, just as the “relations of force” were never able to explain the vicissitudes of power in the panoptic age – except in Marxian idealism – similarly seduction, or the relations of seduction, cannot account for contemporary political events. If everything is driven by seduction, it would not be by this soft seduction, as revised by the ideology of desire, but by a defiant seduction, a dual, antagonistic seduction with the stakes maximized, including those that are secret. It would not be by a game strategy, but by a mythical seduction, not a psychological and operative seduction, not a cold, minimalist seduction.



## SEDUCTION AS DESTINY

Are we to think that this diffuse seduction, which is neither attractive nor dangerous, this specter of seduction that haunts our circuits without secrets, our phantasies without affect, and our contact networks without contacts, that this is its pure form? As if the modern happening with its participation and expressiveness, where the stage and its magic have disappeared, would be the theater's pure form? Or as if the hypothetical and hyper-real mode of intervention in reality – in acting pictures, land-art and body art – where the object, frame and staging of illusions have disappeared, would be the pure form of painting and art?

We are living, in effect, amongst pure forms, in a radical obscenity, that is to say, in the visible, undifferentiated obscenity of figures that were once secret and discrete. The same is true of the social, which today rules in its pure – i.e., empty and obscene – form. The same for seduction, which in its present form, having lost its elements of risk, suspense and sorcery, takes the form of a faint, undifferentiated obscenity.

Shall we refer to Walter Benjamin's genealogy of the work of art and its destiny? At first, the work of art has the status of a *ritual* object, related to an ancestral form of cult. Next it takes on a cultural or *aesthetic* form in a system with fewer obligations; it still retains a singular character, though the latter

is no longer immanent to the ritual object, but transcendental and individualized. Lastly, the aesthetic form gives way to a *political* form in which the work of art as such disappears before the inevitable progress of mechanical reproduction. If in the ritual form there are no originals (the aesthetic originality of cult objects is of little concern in the sacred), the original is again lost in the political form. There is only the multiplication of objects; the political form corresponding to the object's maximum circulation and minimum intensity.

Seduction too would have had its ritual phase (duel, magical, agonistic); its aesthetic phase (as reflected in the "aesthetic strategy" of the seducer, whose domain approaches that of the feminine and sexuality, the ironic and the diabolic – it is then that seduction takes on the meaning it has for us: the possibly accursed distraction of appearances, their strategies, their play); and finally its "political" phase (taking up Benjamin's term, here somewhat ambiguous). In this last phase the original of seduction, its ritual and aesthetic form, disappears in favour of an all-out ventilation whereby seduction becomes *the informal form of politics*, the scaled-down framework for an elusive politics devoted to the endless reproduction of a form without content. (This informal form is inseparable from its technical nature, which is that of networks – just as the political form of the object is inseparable from the techniques of serial reproduction). As with the object, this "political" form corresponds to seduction's maximum diffusion and minimum intensity.



Is this to be seduction's destiny? Or can we oppose this involutional fate, and lay a wager on *seduction as destiny*? Production as destiny, or seduction as destiny? Against the deep structures and their truth, appearances and their destiny? Be that as it may, we are living today in non-sense, and if simulation is its disenchanted form, seduction is its enchanted form.

Anatomy is not destiny, nor is politics: seduction is destiny. It is what remains of a magical, fateful world, a risky, vertiginous and predestined world; it is what is quietly effective in a visibly efficient and stolid world.

The world is naked, the king is naked, and things are clear. All of production, and truth itself, are directed towards disclosure, the unbearable “truth” of sex being but the most recent consequence. Luckily, at bottom, there is nothing to it. And seduction still holds, in the face of truth, a most sibylline response, which is that “perhaps we wish to uncover the truth because it is so difficult to imagine it naked.”

## CultureTexts

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### SEDUCTION

Jean Baudrillard

translated by Brian Singer

NOTHING CAN BE GREATER THAN SEDUCTION  
ITSELF, NOT EVEN THE ORDER THAT  
DESTROYS IT

"*Seduction* is a theory-fiction which resembles nothing which has preceded it. It turns many contemporary discourses inside out, even the most radical, and could very well challenge all modern theory, even, indeed, the rules of theoretical production itself." *Liberation*

"... probably the most influential contemporary media analyst and social theorist." *New Statesman*

"... for Baudrillard, is not seduction a new figure of our freedom?" *L'Express*

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*Seduction* is Jean Baudrillard's most provocative book. Here, under the sign of seduction all of modern theory is put into question, feminism and psychoanalysis most of all. *Seduction* speaks of the sudden reversibility in the order of things where discourse is absorbed into its own signs without a trace of meaning. In the sudden triumph of seduction in apocalyptic culture there is also signalled the end of history.

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Jean Baudrillard is lecturer in Sociology, University of Nanterre. Among his works translated into English are *America*, *Simulations and Simulacra*, *Forget Foucault*, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*.

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