

# Beyond Right and Wrong Or The Mischievous Genius of Image

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What I would like to evoke, about Image in general (the media-image, the technological image), is the perversity of the relationship between the image and its referent, the "supposed real," it is the virtual and irreversible confusion of images and of the sphere of a reality, whose principle we can grasp less and less.

There are all sorts of modalities to this absorption, to this confusion, to this diabolical seduction of images. What should be questioned here, radically, in regard to Image, is the principle of images' reference, this stratagem by which it always seems to refer itself to a real world, to real objects, to reproduce something that would be logically and chronologically anterior to itself. None of this is true. As a simulacrum, Image precedes the Real in that it inverts the logical, causal succession of the Real and its reproduction. In his essay "De l'oeuvre d'art à l'ère de sa reproduction technique" ("On Artwork in the Era of Technical Reproduction") Benjamin already emphasized this, the modern revolution in the order of production (of the Reality, of meaning) by the precession, the anticipation of its reproduction.

It is precisely where it appears to be most truthful, most faithful, and best conforms to the Real (and our technical pictures, photographs or cinema as well as television, are in the vast majority much more "figurative" and "realistic" than all images of past cultures)—that Image is precisely most diabolical, it is in its resemblance (not only analogical anymore, but technological), that image is most immoral and most perverse.

The mirror and its apparition have already introduced in the world of perceptions an ironic *trompe-l'oeil* effect, and it is well-known what evil spells are linked to the apparition of the double. This is also true of all images that surround us, in general one analyses them as a function of their value of representation, that is as a medium of a presence and a sense. The vast majority of current images—photographs, cinema, television—are supposed to witness the world with a naive resemblance, a touching fidelity. We spontaneously trust them because of their realism. We are wrong. They pretend to resemble things, the Real, events, faces. Rather, they really conform, but their conformity itself is diabolical.

One could find a sociological and political equivalent to this diabolical conformity, to this mischievous genius of conformity, in the modern behavior of the masses which, themselves, know so well how to obey the models they are offered, know so well how to reflect the models imposed on them, and by so doing absorb and annihilate them. There is, in this conformity, a power of seduction in the literal sense of the term, that is a power of "detournement," distortion, captivation, and of ironic fascination. There is some sort of fatalistic strategy of conformity here. (A recent filmic example would be Woody Allen's *Zelig*.)

More generally, it is not in its role as a reflection, as a mirror, as a counterpart to the Real, as a representative form, that image is interesting, but as when it starts to contaminate the Real and make it into a model, as when it conforms itself to the Real in order to deform it better; that is when it deceives the Real to its own benefit, when it anticipates the Real to the point where the Real has no time to produce itself as such anymore.

In the dialectical relation between the Real and the Image (that we would like to believe dialectical, that is readable in the sense of real to Image and visa-versa), the Image for a long time has been victorious, and imposed its own immanent, ephemeral, immoral logic, without profundity, beyond right and wrong, beyond good and evil — a logic of extermination of its own referent — a logic of implosion of meaning where the message disappears from the horizon of the medium. On this point, we collectively remain incredibly naive; we still pretend to find a good use of the Image, that is a moral usage — sensible, pedagogical, informational — without seeing that *image somehow revolts against this good usage*, that it is not conducive to sense, nor common sense, but on the contrary, of an implosion, a denial of sense (of event, history, memory, etc.). Let us recall *Holocaust*, this TV show about extermination camps . . .

For all these reasons I do not believe in a pedagogy of the Image, neither in cinema, or of course in television. I do not believe in a dialectic of the Image and the Real, nor, speaking of image, in a pedagogy of message and its meaning. Hence, the secret of the Image (we are still talking about technological contemporary images, here), should not be sought in its distinction from the Real, and therefore in its representational value (aesthetic, critical, or dialectical value), but on the contrary in its collision with the Real, in its short-circuit with the Real, and finally in the implosion of the Image and the Real; there is for us a definitive indistinction of Image and the Real, *which allows no room for representation anymore, as such*.

This collusion of Image and life, of the screen and of daily life, is the most natural thing in the world, you feel it every day. Particularly in America, where the fact that outside of movie theaters the whole country is cinematographical, is not the least of its charms. You can travel through the desert like in a Western, you can travel through metropolises like in front of a continuous screen of signs and formulas. Life is a tracking-shot, it is a continuously kinetic, cinematic, cinematographical course. In this, there is the same equality of pleasures as in Italian or Dutch cities where, coming out of a museum you find a city that looks just like (a l'image meme) its painting, as if it sprang from it. There is a sort of miracle here, that returns, even to American banality, a kind of aesthetic form, of idealistic confusion that transfigures it as in a dream. This is where cinema does not take on the exceptional form of an oeuvre (even of a genius), this is where it invests all of life with a mythical ambiance, this is where it is really thrilling. This is why star idolatry, the cult of Hollywood idols is not a media pathology, but a glorious form of cinema, its mythical transfiguration, probably the last great myth of our modernity. Precisely in the same way that the idol represents nothing, but surrenders like a pure passionate contagious image, that erases the difference between the real Being and its assumption in the imaginary.

Stars are not a "romanesque" support, they are a violently realized ideal. People say: they make us dream, but dreaming is something other than being fascinated by images. Yet, screen idols are inherent to the unrolling of life in images. They are a luxurious pre-fabrication system, shining syntheses of the stereotypes of life and love. *They are a single passion (incarnate): the passion for Image*, and the immanence of desire within the Image. They don't make you dream, they *are* dream, of which they have all the characteristics: they produce a strong effect of condensation (of crystallisation), of contiguity (they are immediately contagious), and above all: they have this characteristic of instantaneous visual materialisation (Anschaulichkeit) of desire, which is also peculiar to dreams. Hence, they do not lead to "romanesque" or sexual imagination, they are immediate visibility, immediate transcription, material pasting, precipitation of desire in Image. Fetishes, Fetish-objects, that have nothing to do with the imaginary, but with the *material fiction* of image.

All these slightly savage considerations come from the savage amateur that I am, and that I want to remain — that is, in a way, uneducated and fascinated. There is a primal pleasure of the image, an anthropological delight (*jouissance*), a raw fascination which does not encumber itself with aesthetic, moral, social or political judgments. This is immoral and this immorality is fundamental.

This raw fascination, here and there, with all moral or social determination, is not one of dreams or of the Imaginary — in the traditional sense of the term. Other images knew how to make us dream or imagine: painting, drawing, theater, architecture and other means of expression (probably language makes us dream better than the Image). There is something else to that, which is peculiar to our modern media-images: if they fascinate us so much it is not because they are a place of production and representation of sense, but on the contrary because they are the place of disappearance of sense and of representation — a place that lets us off of all appreciation of reality, thus the place for a fatal strategy of denying the Real, of the very principle of reality.

Here we come to the paradox in the Image, our images, the ones that overwhelm our everyday life, that invade our life and whose proliferation is potentially infinite (when the extension of sense, itself, is precisely always limited by its end, by its finality, then image itself has profoundly no finality and proceeds by radical contiguity, demultiplying itself according to an irresistible epidemic process, that nobody today can control anymore; our world has truly become infinite, *or rather, exponential through image*; it is caught in a mad race for Image, in a growing fascination that is only accentuated by video and digital computer graphics) hence, we progressively come to the paradox that these images describe for us the equal impossibility of the Real and the Imaginary.

Between the Real and the Imaginary, and upsetting the balance between both, the medium, the image-as-medium, has imposed on us a sort of fatality, which has its own logic. I say, there is a fatal process, meaning: a definitive immanence of Image, without possible transcendence of sense, without possible dialectic of history — also fatal because exponential: not a linear unfolding of images and messages anymore, but an exponential folding of the medium on itself. Fatality is in this endless racing of images, the result being that *there is no other fate to Image than Image*. Today the same thing happens everywhere, when there is no other goal to production than production — overdetermination of production by itself — when there is no other fate to sex but sex — sexual overdetermination of sexuality. This process can be identified anywhere today — for the best and the worst. This is when, in the absence of rules-of-the-game, things are caught in their own



game — that Image becomes more real than the Real — cinema itself becomes more cinema than the cinema, in a sort of vertigo where the only thing Image does is look like itself, flee in its own logic in the perfection of its own model.

From this comes, I think, the erotic dimension specific to our recent imagery. In many cases this erratic and pornographic imagery, all this advertising panoply of breasts, buttocks, and sexes, the displaying of the naked body and sexual body has no other meaning than this: not the arousal of some desire, but the representation of the useless objectivity of things (when seduction is a *challenge* to the useless objectivity of things). The sexual, the nudity in advertising and elsewhere has no other use than being just a special effect, an effect of credibility and a desperate attempt to underline the existence of something. *The sexual is nothing but a ritual of transparency.* It, that had to be hidden, paradoxically has no other use than to mask all that is left of truth, all that is left of reality, and of course it, too, partakes of this disincarnated passion.

But where does our fascination for these erotic or pornographic pictures come from? Certainly not from seduction. We don't even watch them, correctly speaking. For the Regard to exist, the object must veil and unveil itself, disappear at every moment; this is why there exists in the Regard this kind of oscillation. On the contrary, these naked images are not caught in a game of emergence and disappearance. The body is already there, like any other object, without the spark of a possible absence, in a state of radical disillusion that is the state of pure presence. In a real image certain parts are visible, others not; visible parts make others invisible; there is a sort of rhythm of emergence and secrecy is established, a flotation line of the imaginary. Although everything is of equal visibility, everything shares the same focusless space. Fascination probably comes from there, from this disincarnation, the aesthetics of disincarnation about which Octavio Paz speaks. Fascination is this disincarnated passion of a Regard with no object, of a Regard with no Image. It has been a long time since all our mediated spectacles, including the one of the body, including the one of sex, have broken the stupefaction barrier. Stupefaction of a vitrified exacerbation of sex, of an empty scene where nothing is happening anymore, and yet of which the Regard is filled up. It is not only the exacerbation of sex, it is also the scene of information or of politics: nothing happens there, yet we are saturated by it.

Do we desire this fascination? Do we desire this form of pure presence, do we desire this *pornographic objectivity* of the world? How to know? There may be a collective vertigo of fleeing forward in the obscenity of a pure and empty form where at the same time the disappropriation of the sexual is played out, and its dis-

qualification, the disappropriation of the visible, and its degradation is played out. Because this fascination — which is also a sort of magic of disappearance, is in pornographic images as well as in the whole of modern art, whose objective, whose obsession is literally to be no more watchable, challenging all seduction of the Regard. Modern Art is not at all an art of seduction, neither is modern sexuality.

On the other hand, this obscenity, and the indifference that characterizes it, do not inevitably lead to neutrality. They may possibly become collective values again, bankable values, besides, one can see new rituals reconstituting themselves on these values, rituals of transparency. Moreover, we certainly tease ourselves with the comedy of obscenity, the comedy of sexuality, as other societies tease the comedy of ideology, as for example Italian society plays for itself the comedy of confusion and terrorism. In advertising one plays the comedy of the naked and prostituted feminine body (consequently the naivete of recrimination against all this "prostitution" of the feminine body, and the naivete of all virtuous legislation). Sexual liberation, omnipresent pornography, including pornography of information, of participation, of free expression — if all this were true it would be unbearable. If all this were true, we would really be into obscenity, that is, into naked truth; primal, with no make up but not without pretension: the crazy pretension of things to express their truth. Happily we are not there yet, because, above all things, at the moment things are about to prove themselves true, they always reverse themselves, and this reversability protects their secrets.

Of sex, none can say whether it has been liberated or not, none can say whether the incidence of sexual pleasure has increased or not. In sexuality as in art the idea of progress is absurd. On the contrary, obscenity, itself, like transparency belongs to the order of progress. And it progresses ineluctably, precisely because it does not belong to the order of sexual desire anymore, but to Image frenzy. Solicitation and voracity for images is growing immeasurably. *They have become our true sexual object*, the only object of our desire. And it is in this substitution, in this confusion of desire and its equivalent, materialized into Image (and not only of sexual desire, but of the desire for knowledge and of its equivalent materialized into "information," of desire for dream and its equivalent materialized into all the Disneylands in the world, of desire for space and its equivalent programmed as holiday transit, of desire for games and its equivalent programmed as the multiple forms of telematics), it is in this promiscuity, in this ubiquity of images, in this viral contamination of things by images, that is the transparency and obscenity of our culture.

And there are no limits or controls over this, because images — as opposed to the sexual animal species, on whom some kind of internal biological regulation keeps watch — are preserved by nothing from infinite pullulation, since they are not sexually bred and ignore sex and death. This is probably why we are so obsessed by them, in this time of recession of sex and death, whose place they take. Through them maybe we dream of the immortality of protozoa, which infinitely multiply themselves by contiguity, and know nothing else anymore than an asexual chaining.

*translated by Laurent Charreyron and Amy Gerstler*