

From Jean Baudrillard
"The Perfect Crime"

The Automatic Writing of the World

The perfect crime is that of an unconditional realization of the world by the actualization of all data, the transformation of all our acts and all events into pure information: in short, the final solution, the resolution of the world ahead of time by the cloning of reality and the extermination of the real by its double.

This is precisely the theme of Arthur C. Clarke's short story 'The Nine Billion Names of God'.¹¹ A community of Tibetan monks have for centuries devoted themselves to transcribing these nine billion names of God, and once they have accomplished this the purpose of the world will be achieved, and it will come to an end. The task is a tiresome one and the weary monks call in technicians from IBM, whose computers do the job in a few months. In a sense, the history of the world is completed in real time by the workings of virtual technology. Unfortunately, this also means the disappearance of the world in real time. For suddenly, the promise of the end is fulfilled and, as they walk back down into the valley, the technicians, who did not really believe in the prophecy, are aghast to see the stars going out one by one.

This is perhaps the fate that awaits us at the end-point of this technical transfiguring of the world: its accelerated end, its immediate resolution – the final success of

modern millenarianism, though with no hope of salvation, apocalypse or revelation. Merely hastening the final term, accelerating the movement towards disappearance pure and simple. And so, quite without knowing it, the human race might, like the IBM technicians, be assigned to this noble task: triggering the code for the world's automatic disappearance by exhausting all its possibilities.

This is the very essence of the Virtual.

Live your life in real time – live and suffer directly on-screen. Think in real time – your thought is immediately encoded by the computer. Make your revolution in real time – not in the street, but in the recording studio. Live out your amorous passions in real time – the whole thing on video from start to finish. Penetrate your body in real time – endovideoscopy: your own bloodstream, your own viscera as if you were inside them.

Nothing escapes this. There is always a hidden camera somewhere. You can be filmed without knowing it. You can be called to act it all out again for any of the TV channels. You think you exist in the original-language version, without realizing that this is now merely a special case of dubbing, an exceptional version for the 'happy few'. Any of your acts can be instantly broadcast on any station. There was a time when we would have considered this a form of police surveillance. Today, we regard it as advertising.

In any case, the virtual camera is in our heads. No need of a medium to reflect our problems in real time: every existence is telepresent to itself. The TV and the media long since left their media space to invest 'real' life from the inside, precisely as a virus does with a normal cell. No need of the headset and the data suit: it is our will that ends up moving about the world as though inside a computer-generated image. We have all swallowed our receivers, and this produces intense interference on account of the excessive proximity of life and its double, and the collapsing of time and distance. Whether in this telepresence, in the live TV psychodrama or in

the immediacy of information on all screens, what we have here is the same short-circuiting of real life.

Virtuality is different from the spectacle, which still left room for a critical consciousness and demystification. The abstraction of the 'spectacle' was never irrevocable, even for the Situationists. Whereas unconditional realization is irrevocable, since we are no longer either alienated or dispossessed: we are in possession of all the information. We are no longer spectators, but actors in the performance, and actors increasingly integrated into the course of that performance. Whereas we could face up to the unreality of the world as spectacle, we are defenceless before the extreme reality of this world, before this virtual perfection. We are, in fact, beyond all disalienation. This is the new form of terror, by comparison with which the horrors of alienation were very small beer.

In what was the golden age of joyful disillusionment, we carried out the critique of all illusions – the metaphysical, the religious and the ideological. Only one remains: the illusion of criticism itself. The objects we subjected to the full glare of criticism – sex, dreams, work, history, power – have taken their revenge by disappearing, producing, in return, the consoling illusion of truth. Having no more victims to devour, the critical illusion has devoured itself. Even more than the industrial machines, it is the machinery of thought itself that is laid off. At the extreme end of its journey, critical thought has wound back on itself. Where once it was future-orientated, it is now umbilical. In surviving its own self, it in fact helps its object to survive. Just as religion has become definitively realized in other – irreligious, secular, political and cultural – forms, where it is impossible to pin it down as religion (including the current revival, where it assumes the mask of religion), so the critique of virtual technologies masks the fact that their concept is seeping everywhere into real life in homoeopathic doses. In denouncing the ghostliness of those technologies – and of the media – one implies that there is somewhere an original form of lived existence. Whereas, if the rate of

→ reality is falling every day, this is because the medium itself has passed into life, has become the ordinary ritual of transparency. All this digital, numeric, electronic equipment is merely incidental to the deep-seated virtualization of human beings. And if this so grips the collective imagination, that is because we are already – not in some other world, but in this life itself – in a state of socio-, photo- and videosynthesis. The virtual and the media are our chlorophyllous function. And if we are able today to produce a clone of a particular famous actor which will be made to act in his place, this is because long ago, without knowing it, he became his own replica or his own clone, before he actually was cloned.

This whole virtual technology media circus, this perpetual 'reality show,'¹² has an ancestor: the ready-made. Those who are plucked from their real lives to come and act out the psychodrama of their AIDS or their marital problems on TV have an ancestor in Duchamp's bottle-rack which that artist similarly plucked from the real world to confer on it elsewhere – in a field we still agree to call art – an undefinable hyperreality. Paradoxical acting-out, instantaneous short-circuiting. The bottle-rack, exscribed from its context, purpose and function, became more real than reality (hyperreal) and more art than art (transaesthetics of banality, of insignificance, of nullity, against which the pure and indifferent form of art is verified today).

Any old object, individual or situation is today a virtual ready-made in so far as one can say of anyone or anything what Duchamp was, at bottom, saying of the bottle-rack: it exists, I've met it. Everyone is invited, in this same way, to present themselves as they are and play out their lives 'live' on-screen, just as the ready-made played out its role exactly as it was, 'live' on the gallery screen. And the two are merged in the initiative launched by new museums where the aim is not now to bring people to stand *in front of* the pictures – which can be done successfully, but isn't interactive enough and smacks too much of the 'spectacle' – but to stand *in the*

pictures – in the virtual reality of *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, for example – which they can in this way enjoy in real time, possibly even interacting with the work and the figures in it.

There is the same problem with the TV 'reality shows': the viewer has to be brought not in front of the screen (he has always been there, and that is indeed his alibi and refuge) but into the screen, taken to the other side of the information set-up. He has to be made to carry out the same conversion as Duchamp did with his bottle-rack when he transferred it, just as it was, to the other side of art, creating, as he did so, a definitive ambiguity between art and reality.

Art today is simply this paradoxical confusion of the two, and the aesthetic intoxication which ensues. Similarly, information is simply the paradoxical confusion of the event and the medium, and the political uncertainty which ensues. So, we have all become ready-mades. Hypostatized like the bottle-rack, our sterile identities taxidermized, we have become living museum pieces, like those entire populations which are transfigured *in situ* by aesthetic or cultural decree, cloned in our own image by High Definition and condemned, by that exact resemblance, to media stupefaction, just as the ready-made is condemned to aesthetic stupefaction. And just as Duchamp's acting-out opens on to the (generalized) zero degree of aesthetics, where any old item of rubbish can be taken as a work of art (which also means that any old work of art can be taken for rubbish), so this media acting-out opens on to a generalized virtuality which puts an end to the real by its promotion of every single instant.

The key concept of this Virtuality is High Definition. That of the image, but also of time (Real Time), of music (High Fidelity), of sex (pornography), of thought (Artificial Intelligence), of language (digital languages), of the body (the genetic code and the genome). Everywhere, High Definition marks the transition – beyond any natural determination – to an operational formula – and, precisely, a 'definitive' one, the transition to a world where referential substance is becoming increasingly

rare. The highest definition of the medium corresponds to the lowest definition of the message – the highest definition of the news item corresponds to the lowest definition of the event, the highest definition of sex (porn) corresponds to the lowest definition of desire, the highest definition of language (in digital coding) corresponds to the lowest definition of meaning, the highest definition of the other (in immediate interaction) corresponds to the lowest definition of otherness and exchange, etc.

The high-definition image. This has nothing to do with representation, and even less to do with aesthetic illusion. The whole generic illusion of the image is cancelled out by technical perfection. As hologram or virtual reality or three-dimensional picture, the image is merely the emanation of the digital code which generates it. It is merely the mania for making an image no longer an image or, in other words, it is precisely what removes a dimension from the real world.

Already, in moving from the silents to the talkies, then to colour and 3-D and the current range of special effects, the cinematographic illusion faded as the technical prowess increased. No empty space any more, no ellipsis, no silence. The more we move towards that perfect definition, that useless perfection, the more the power of the illusion is lost. To appreciate the truth of this, one only has to think of the Peking Opera and how, with the mere movement of their bodies, the old man and the girl brought to life on the stage the sheer size of the river and how, in the duel scene, the two bodies, skimming each other with their weapons yet not touching, made the darkness in which the duel took place tangible. That was total illusion – an ecstasy more physical and material than aesthetic or theatrical, precisely because all realist presence of the night or the river had been excised. Today, they would pipe tons of water into the studio, and the duel would be shot in darkness with infra-red cameras.

Real Time: instantaneous proximity of the event and its double in information.

Proximity of human beings and their remote action: settle all your business at the other end of the world, via an ectoplasmic intermediary. Like every detail of the hologram, every instant of real time is microscopically encoded. Every little bit of time packs in the total information relating to the event, as though it were being mastered in miniature from all sides at once. Now, there is something obscene about the instant replication of an event, act or speech and their immediate transcription, for some degree of delay, pause or suspense is essential to thought and speech. The immediate totting up, itemizing and storing of all these exchanges, precisely as occurs with writing on word-processors, bespeaks an interactive compulsion which respects neither the timing nor the rhythm (not to mention the pleasure) of exchange, and combines artificial insemination and premature ejaculation in the same operation.

There is a profound incompatibility between real time and the symbolic rule of exchange. What governs the sphere of communication (the interface, immediacy, the abolition of time and distance) has no meaning in the sphere of exchange, where the rule is that what is given should never be returned immediately. It has to be returned, but never right away. That is a serious, mortal insult. There must never be immediate interaction. It is, precisely, time which separates the two symbolic moments and holds their resolution in abeyance. Time with no delay, 'live' time, is inexpiable. The whole field of communications is, thus, of the order of the inexpiable, since everything in that field is interactive, is given and returned without delay, without that suspense, minute as it may be, which constitutes the temporal rhythm of exchange.

Artificial Intelligence. Thought at last realized, fully materialized by all the virtualities of analysis, synthesis and calculation, just as real time is defined by the ceaseless interaction of all moments and all participants. A high-definition operation: the information which results is truer than truth – it is true in real time. That is why it is fundamentally uncertain. The fact that Artificial Intelligence veers off

into over-high definition, into a crazy sophistication of data and operations, merely confirms that this is indeed the achieved utopia of thought.

And now computers controlled by thought are on the way. There is a danger that this extreme form will produce some strange results. At what threshold of consciousness or formalization will the machine intervene? There is a danger that, by reflex anticipation, it will log into subconscious – if not, indeed, unconscious – thoughts, into the most primitive phantasies. Like the double of the Student of Prague, who was always there before him, transforming his obscurest whims into acts. In this way our 'thoughts' will be actualized even before they occur, exactly like the event in the information system. If that is what we must necessarily come to, then the consequence would be that the whole system of thought would soon be aligned to the system of the machine. Thought would end up thinking only what the machine can take in and process, or would think only when the machine requests it. This is already how things stand with computers and information technology. In the generalized interface, thought itself will become virtual reality, the equivalent of computer-generated images or the automatic writing of word-processors.

Artificial Intelligence? There is not a shadow of artifice in it, not the shadow of an idea of illusion, seduction or the play of the world, which is much more subtle, perverse and arbitrary. (Now, thought is neither a mechanics of higher functions nor a range of operational reflexes. It is a rhetoric of forms, of shifting illusion and appearances – an anamorphosis of the world, not an analysis.) The cerebral, computing machine is not the master of appearances; it is the master only of calculation, and its task, like that of all cybernetic and virtual machines, is to destroy this essential illusion by counterfeiting the world in real time.

Just as the illusion of the image disappears into its virtual reality, the illusion of the body into its genetic formulation and the illusion of the world into its artificial technical form, so also do we see disappear, in Artificial Intelligence, the (super)-

natural understanding of the world as play, as delusion, as machination, as crime – and not as logical mechanism, or as reflex cybernetic machine which would have its mirror and model in the human brain.

End of the raw illusion of thought, of the scene, of passion, end of the illusion of the world and its vision (and not its representation), end of the illusion of the Other, of Good and Evil (particularly of Evil), of true and false, end of the raw illusion of death, or that of existing at any cost: all these things vanish into telereality, into real time, into the sophisticated technologies which are our initiation into models, into the virtual, into the opposite of illusion – total disillusion.

In the realm of shadows, no one any longer has a shadow, and there is no danger of treading on it and ripping it, as Peter Schlemihl did.¹³ What can happen, on the other hand, is for bodies no longer to project their shadows, but shadows to project their bodies, which might then be said to be mere shadows of shadows. This is already the case with our virtual reality, which is merely the putting back into circulation, *sub specie corporis*, *sub specie realitatis*, of the abstraction and the digital data of life. As in that other fable where the Devil put the shadow of the student who had sold it to him back into circulation in the living form of the Double, for which the student was then merely the stand-in.

This virtual operation of the world is a paradoxical chimaera. The worldwide listing of all data is the same phantasy as that of the spelling of the names of God – a chimaera in which we bury ourselves as though inside a metal sarcophagus, in a state of weightlessness, dreaming of living out all possible situations by the grace of the Digital. Phantasy of synthesis of all the elements, by which we seek to force the gates of the real world.

With Virtual Reality and all its consequences, we have passed over into the extreme of technology, into technology as an extreme phenomenon. Beyond the end, there is no longer any reversibility; there are no longer any traces of the

earlier world, nor is there even any nostalgia for it. This hypothesis is much graver than that of technological alienation or Heidegger's *Gestell*. It is the hypothesis of a project of irreversible disappearance in the purest logic of the species. The hypothesis of an absolutely real world, where, unlike Michaux's artist, we would have succumbed to the temptation not to leave traces.

This is what is at stake in Virtuality. And there can be no doubting its absolute ambition. If it were brought to completion, that radical effectuation would be the equivalent of a perfect crime. Whereas the 'original' crime is never perfect and always leaves traces (we ourselves as living, mortal beings are the trace of that criminal imperfection), future extermination – that extermination which would be produced by an absolute determination of the world and its elements – would leave no trace. We would not even have the time to disappear. We would be disintegrated in Real Time and Virtual Reality long before the stars went out.

Fortunately, all this is literally impossible. Very High Definition, with its ambition of producing images, sounds, information, bodies in microvision, in stereoscopy, as you have never seen them before, as you will never see them, is unrealizable. As is the phantasy of Artificial Intelligence: the brain's becoming a world, the world's becoming a brain, so as to function without bodies, unfailing, autonomized, inhuman. Too intelligent, too super-efficient to be true.

There is, in fact, no room for both natural and artificial intelligence. There is no room for both the world and its double.