

# VIRTUALITY AND THE GHOST OF RELIGION

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“You described me as a philosopher. I have no slides to show; I don’t work with machines, so I will stick to theoretical comments rather than technological demonstrations. Of course I’m concerned with media and technological issues, because it is impossible to think without media. For a philosopher, clearly, the media question is both an intellectual challenge and a theoretical necessity.

Since we are speaking here of high culture and popular culture, it is important to note that every culture reflects and distills a certain state of technological development. I will try to sketch out several reflections around these notions of culture, media, and the work of art.

The question, the distinction, between *élite* culture and popular culture, mass culture, industrial culture (as the Frankfurt School suggested we call it)... indicates immediately to me that there are actually three cultures. If we want to distinguish them arbitrarily, we could call the one “literary/humanist culture,” the other “scientific culture,” and the third “popular,” or “mass,” or “industrial” culture. Actually, what we are doing here is trying to classify three ways of being together — as Philippe Queau explained when he described the etymology of culture. Clearly, the word culture has an anthropological meaning. It refers to the basic daily ways in which we form a group and live together. At the same time, with the term “*élite* culture” we designate that which pulls us away from our daily, ordinary lives. So with the same word we describe the community, and also that promise of universality, or longevity which characterizes the pretensions and the great works of high or elitist culture. And to further complicate this irritating question of cultures and their terms, which are always hard to articulate, one must recall that within the term “culture” lies the ghost of religion [“*le fantome des cultes*”]; and that wherever you find actual religious feeling, you will discover a blurring of the three separate terms I’ve outlined. What I mean is that

religious worship promises supreme knowledge, perfected social ties — with a feeling of greater humanity or community — and aesthetic perfection. Of course we have lost religion, but I was glad that in Mr. McCracken's talk he raised the issue of a lesser god; this is something that I will soon touch on myself.

So what has happened to art since, let's say, Romanticism? What I mean to ask is, what does it mean to say we are "modern"? I will try to enumerate certain responses to this issue: primarily Walter Benjamin's famous conception in an article relevant to our conference, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". In fact, this morning Gail Lord spoke in detail about a phenomenon that Benjamin condensed into one word, the word "aura." Aura: the fact that a work presents itself in its proper site, for the first time, in a physical encounter (certainly not a virtual one), and as a distinct object; but which is not at all a close encounter, since Benjamin defines the aura as "*l'unique apparition d'un lointain*" [the unique phenomenon of a distance]. This conception of the aura was clearly quite useful to the Frankfurt School in depreciating the productions of mass culture as obviously lacking in aura, starting from the moment when Walter Benjamin defined aura as the unique phenomenon of a distance. And so, because certain works or objects have this aura there is a convergence, and ceremony, and voyage, toward these objects; while on the other hand modernity seems to consist in mass culture, which distributes works directly to the home as if they were hot water and gas, and

also, importantly, through the means of television. So it follows that television should have much less symbolic power because it has no aura at all, though mass culture theorists and critics have argued against these notions and we know this debate by heart.

So, this concept of the aura is compelling because it's clearly very familiar to us, very palpable, very carnal, very strong, and, at the same time, I think, very false in the way Benjamin argues it. But let's give Benjamin's arguments a chance. If I follow this train of thought, the work in the museum is, by definition, at a distance. This means that no matter how terribly close it seems, you are forbidden to touch it, and this taboo makes the work sacred. This conception of aura is already a bit problematic, because the museum itself constitutes a desacralization compared to the former status that the works occupied — which might have been, for example, in a site of worship [*des lieux de culte*]. And in a site of worship, of course, the sculpture or painting is contained in a certain architectural setting which mutes the focus on that object itself. So clearly the museum is already an incredible alteration and exaggeration of the aura, because within a gallery the painting or sculpture or object is in exile, and we have moved from the site of the cult to the sight of culture [*on est passé du culte à la culture*]. We have moved from the value of sacred rituals—prayer, kneeling, prostration—to the values of exhibition. So though the museum certainly sacralizes its objects, this sacralization is an enormous desacralization in relation to certain religious or

cultural states which precede the stage we call "cultural" — the museum exhibition.

The museum causes that which was fixed, the sculpture in the temple, to become a moveable feast. Clearly mass culture or contemporary art has accelerated this mobilization and this reproduction (which, according to Benjamin's arguments, are catastrophic). This mobilization also produced Pop Art, which is in itself a kind of acceleration, a powerfully explicit part of movement. And, of course, we often resist our reproduced objects with our works of art or our works of culture, which are in themselves serially reproduced. We also resist constantly by means of secondary resacralizations. For example, when we have a work by some author, and when this author makes an appearance and we have him sign his own work, this is obviously a way of resacralizing, reheating what had grown cold in the serialized, mechanized object. This rebirth/reconsecration is accomplished through the experience of contact with a physical presence, and of a unique trace which the author has willingly inscribed on the title page. So Benjamin's concept, his critique, his theory of the aura and of its continual loss within mass culture, i.e. in the mechanical reproduction of works, this stimulating and tempting theory is nonetheless highly questionable.

So, in discussing what has happened to art, the second point to consider relates to a word which has been spoken many times today, the word "direct." For me, there is an important distinction in media studies between "direct" and "deferred" [*différée* — which in French also

means differentiated/varied], and this is certainly a primary distinction in philosophy. So when we think of the order of the book — and this morning several speakers, particularly the librarian Patrick Bazin, spoke of the order of the book — certainly this order is deferred, and, in most cases, the images, engravings and illustrations are also deferred, by definition. But a certain type of image can, in a way, be seen as a direct image. The principal category of this type of image, of course, would be photography. The photograph is direct in the sense that where there is a photograph there is an imprint, which is to say that the image has not passed through an artist's mental conception or representation, but is printed directly on film. And I think that semiology can distinguish between a painted canvas and a photograph — the former is an icon while the latter is an indice in the sense of Charles Peirce, and this concept of the indice is compelling. This term helps to isolate a certain type of image which is much more direct than others. The photograph is indicative [*indicielle*] and this provides its poignant aspect, its attestation of reality. If within that piece of paper a face takes on a certain expression, necessarily there must have been, once, a flesh-and-blood face which adopted or actually manifested, honestly, that emotional expression. In this way photography represents a remarkable acceleration of transmissions, a remarkable short-circuit compared to the long mental process of the traditional figurative painter. And there too, modern art has multiplied the short-circuits and the acceleration of

the chain of transmission. So in painting — abstract, action, body-art, silk-screening, printing — and the thousand and one other manifestations of contemporary art there is a desire for the indice [*une pulsation indicielle*], a push towards shorter circuits: not towards representation but towards presence. Couldn't we then declare that the best possible indice is that *the thing itself* is printed, not its representative nor its simulacrum (despite the fact that in epicurean theories the simulacrum itself is the indice)? But let us abandon these questions. Briefly, I think that there is an important semiotic distinction to be made between the painted canvas and the photographic image and that the basic distinction is that of the direct vs. the differed, which helps explain our affective and emotional responses to these image types.

So, to take up this history of the direct in the twentieth century, primarily in art works and in the museum — because our topic today is the museum — I think it is clear that collages, since Braque and Picasso, which include “le readymade” as an extension of the collage mode, should be seen as breakthroughs, or impulses towards the *indice* [*poussées indicielles*] in the order of iconic representations. Marcel Duchamp, the creator of the first readymades, proposed for a universal exhibition of surrealism to attach a prosthetic bust to the flyleaf of the catalogue, with this phrase written below: Please feel. [*Prière de toucher* — which means literally: Pray, touch] I think that “Please feel” could, with a pun, be called a work of art [*un oeuvre d'art*] by which I mean a work of dart [*dard*] which

pierces, pricks, or stings the gaze. So, through these different manifestations of modernity, there is, I think an increasing speed and impatience. Perhaps here art is trying to catch up with the information highway. And I say “trying to catch up” because if it did, it would be a certain catastrophe for art — an art in the grip of information, or, even worse, in the grip of communication. These are my notations on the modernist impulse.

The third notation concerns the concept of semiotic fissure [*coupure*]. Semiotic fissure is an easy thing to understand. It means that the sign is not the thing, and that the representation (for example, the use of words) consists in resorting to artifacts or to virtual realities, since, after all, the virtual begins with the alphabet, and even before that — virtuality must have coincided with “man's development” [*l'homminisation*], and man is an animal who virtualizes everything around him. But in particular, the world of signs introduces a very strong fissure in relation to the biosphere, and so we know that the world of signs is in fact the human realm. There is a secret bliss [*rejouissance*] and a strong temptation to fracture this semiotic hierarchy of the sign and the thing, and a great pleasure can be found in obliterating or suppressing this semiotic fissure. This can be seen quite clearly in many contemporary aesthetic events and also, certainly, in mass culture. For example, theatre exhibits semiotic fissure in a most solemn and majestic way, since the stage distinguishes the set from the “house” where the audience sits, reinforcing the distinction between fiction and

reality. The order of the spectacle is thus absolutely dominated by the idea of semiotic fissure. I think it is clear to all of us that television does not obey this device, and video games even less so. We are no longer before the image, that is to say with a clear cut distinction between our presence and the representation, no longer with a central perspective, a rational vanishing point, a geometric construction — which are all contained, as you know, within the theatrical space — but instead with a new form of representation. Well, yes, there is television, a theme close to Derrick de Kerckhove's heart, I think — the image which imprints itself in us all. The spectator-screen relationship is reversed to the extent that the image becomes practically tactile. And I say "practically" because this is a subject which could be expanded upon; but, admittedly the gaze becomes almost tactile, or (even worse) the image becomes tactile as it comes towards us more than our gaze seeks it. The glowing TV screen could be likened to a kind of neural tattoo. With this set-up, and also with interactive video games — and, already, with television, we are interactive through the remote control (although Derrick will vigorously contest the suggestion that TV is interactive). In any case, through all these set-ups, starting with television, there is a weakening of the semiotic fissure — in all gripping devices, by which I mean those that are tactile in terms of the gaze. So in other words, we are gripped within a spectacle which is no longer a spectacle. That's an old metaphor, the society of the spectacle, an older way of imagining things

lifted from the theatrical stage and the semiotic fissure it represents.

I would like to elaborate on this phenomenon and these examples, which I find quite promising, and which will allow me to show that, with mass culture (and by modern or contemporary art in particular) we have moved from representation to actual presence. We have moved from observation to interaction, and we seem to be moving from sight to tactile engagement: from the icon to the indice. I think these are two completely different semiotic systems. In fact, one could say with McLuhan that the message leans towards the massage, i.e. total immersion into the flux; and that the object tends to give us palpable environmental or ambient experiences. This occurs, for example, with modern dance, with those trances produced by the advent of ambient music, and with all types of rock. The participant, who is no longer a spectator, is invited to manifest, here and now, strong sensations. This is a kind of return of the aura, if you will. Though the concept of the aura seems inconsistent to me, because this "here and now" experience is effectively a form of trance which is different from the aura. After all, already with photography (which is a reproducible genre) there is a great surge of aura, in the ghost of presence. I think that ultimately the notion of the aura has become irrelevant, and should probably be left behind, or at least problematized. Instead, in mass culture there exist powerful affective, experiential, participatory surges (which Benjamin would limit within the term "emotion"

and call the effect of an aura) which are actually built upon repetition, reproduction, and serial copying.

In brief, technology and modernity do not strip the world of its enchantment, but instead help us return to the *culte*, to shamanism; but it is doubtless a "*dieu faible*," a lesser god. I think that the world of modern communication privileges this dilapidated source, Mallarmé's "rotten but powerful source." Mallarmé saw this rotten source in certain layouts [*dispositifs*] or typographical technologies — and already we have changed all of that. Perhaps we are no longer the society of the spectacle, but rather the society of contact and physical abuse.

So, my fourth point would be to ask if, with the enormous promises of technology all around us, we live at the end of the grand narratives. We often speak of an irreducible pluralism. So, what does history become? To live in a typographical society is to be a [hi]storyteller. Is the unprecedented multiplying of world space and its marvelous technologies of transmission and communication actually drying up the well of history? Are these openings actually disintegrating linear syntax that are forcing narratives to crumble? Let's take an obvious instance; for example, in my hotel room, in the dresser drawer lies a Bible and on top of the dresser stands the television. This means that I have a coherent narrative hidden below (one which is actually quite lacking in terms of factual information), and displayed on top I have another kind of information at my disposal — yet I can completely fracture it with my remote control.

It's all just crumbs on the programming grill. We live through this fractured information at every moment. Perhaps this fracturing results from the pressure of the real [*le réel*], its transcendence, which all knowledge, all memories, all narratives force us to foreshorten, to misapprehend [*méconnaître*], to forget. Modern narratives are haunted by the pruning which is necessarily innate in all narratives. The modern narrative, modern since Mallarmé or Joyce — to cite men about whom I think McLuhan had much to say, particularly Joyce — this narrative *is* the sharp crisis of realism because it represents a divorce between the real and the narrative. The real is persistently outside of the narrative, to one side of it. In Sartre's *Nausea*, a novel which speaks clearly to this issue, the author tells us we must choose between living and narrating. And so, all modern literature is an affront to or a denunciation of narrative linearity in the name of something stronger or more attractive, which is life, but which is always outside, delayed, always to be continued. . . . So there is always the sting of bad conscience in all these representations. This bad conscience is no longer centred on the narrative text, but upon the goal of universal atomization, an atomization which is called democracy. We can say that the ceremony is over, convergence is finished, and of course the Republic, the school, the pyramid, all that is vertical, and several other things as well.

When I was flying here I watched a film on the plane along with all the other passengers: *Sister Act II*. This film addresses the question of

ceremony, of the lesser god, and of education. It takes place in a Catholic school and the sisters have no more funds to keep it open. So they call Whoopi Goldberg, who has an angelic voice, and she proposes that the multiracial and anti-communitarian students form a choir. That's what the film is about, building a choir. And because it's a mass culture film with a happy ending, the choir will be constructed around a work which will most certainly triumph. The choral piece will be Beethoven's "Hymn to Joy", but a "Hymn to Joy" sung in a most anarchic and almost anti-communitarian style. And at the end, don't you just know it, Whoopi will say to the kids: "Rip off your uniforms, improvise, be who you really are." Each one will really loosen up and give full rein to her passions, and this very anarchism will create the greatest and most triumphant of choral songs. So the school is saved, the children sing together, the community is restored, and the good nun wins. But she's not really a good nun; God is no longer transcendent. He has become horizontal, or "lesser," and musical; God is now musical and horizontal and the good nuns will sell a lot of tickets and fundraise for the choir, because good business is crucial to the success of their mission. So the film's final harmony is optimistic, of course, and very liberal, because we can all be who we are, and it will come together anyway! And here lies an issue which is relevant to this conference: how can we construct a group out of music when the grand narrative has been suppressed? Where *is* God, and how does divine intervention fit in? Behind

the "Hymn to Joy" lies Beethoven — maybe that's a strong enough reference upon which to build a community... Kant said of the work of art: "It is the promise of a community." And Adorno wrote more specifically about music that: "Music is a way of harmonizing and a model of how to be together. It's within music that people feel the strongest bonds."

So here are several reflections — a bit of channel surfing, and as unordered as that. Let me skip to the conclusion. I am in complete agreement with Alain Renaud when he says that we should not contrast the real with the virtual. Because the notion of perception is already a construct and produces a way of talking about what is real. In effect, we never do anything except conflate, virtualize, construct. Let's be constructionists — we have no choice, the only thing we do is construct and reconstruct. Since the dawn of human perception, culture's path has been one of progressive detachment. By this I mean, continual semiotization. And also by this, I mean virtualization. And this is the price we pay for universality. We are universal to the extent that we are detached and semiotized. But, when this detachment grows too vast, when abstraction becomes too mathematical, or too mechanical, then there is the compensation of indicity. And through the indice we express our desire to touch, our desire to participate. We have spoken at great length here today of the manufacturing or construction of meaning and factories of meaning. Well, in French the word "*sens*" [meaning] is a marvelous word, because it has three meanings *sens* —

at once: the direction, the signification, and sensitivity. I would say that the question of symbolic mediation is quite an urgent one, and contemporary art poses these questions in a very acute way. It is a magnifying glass or microscope poised to view democracy. In a democracy, we are all "between ourselves," by which I mean, without transcendent mediation, without God, without a vertical form of sacralization. But at the same time democracy could be seen as virtual, because it must constantly reaffirm its relationship to those in positions of power, for example, in relation to monarchy, where the

relationship is one of filial agreement. And so, there is much to say about this virtual regime in terms of its politics. It is at the same time our own cultural system — that culture of marvelous images — and of course, the wider cultural context starting with the origins of democracy (the choice of the Occident, the choice of an open society, not a closed one). And so, this system is both permanent and also just starting to happen. There, that's enough, I think, for now."

Translated by Rachel Fulford