

In the pedestrian shopping promenade, lined with endless shoe stores, two boys play accordians—trade name Child Prodigy—two blocks apart. Each has his lunch beside him, a Coca-Cola and a sandwich, carefully packaged, Each has a sign telling passers-by that they are refugees—from where they do not say—and that their father and little brothers need money to survive. One is named Florian and the other Christian. When the Correntinos stop to ask them questions, fascinated by the appearance of exotic beggars from elsewhere peddling music in their shopping concourse, the two boys smile angelic smiles and lift their fingers to their mouths as if to signal they are dumb—without language—but not without guile. Gypsies or Kosovo Albanians fleeing a war, they cannot or will not say. A few stores down sit the regular beggars. A woman with her two babies is empty handed. An old blind man clutches a clear plastic pop bottle that has nothing in it. Meanwhile, the two accordion players beat out music to the sound of constant change clattering through the slot of their tin cans, carefully closed so that no one can know how much money they are collecting each hour.

At the Casino Hotel bar overlooking the river, where Graham Greene once sat scribbling notes for *The Honourary Consul*, a couple sit eating white bread sandwiches and drinking beer from tall frosty glasses. Sinister is a word that keeps entering their conversation. Perhaps, she tells him, the struggle for power is so sinister because it is an empty abstraction, a cobweb of illusions, a force that slips away into the everyday world of petty manipulations. They pause and stare out at the lapacho trees in full bloom, blossoms falling softly to earth forming vast petal carpets of soft mauve and vibrant rose. The setting sun, an iridescent ball of red, falls into a thick mist rising from the river. As dusk envelops the city, old friends are torn apart by the political upheaval. Loyalties dissolve into the murky waters of power struggles and brute survival. Hope is cast up against the cruel ironies of a global defeat. What to do with this encounter of dreams and materiality? Where to take the contradictory emotions that rise like bile from the heart? How to believe that utopia can still exist, if even for a moment, in a sleepy Argentinean town that unexpectedly awoke one day to marches in the plaza and impossible demands for social justice?

—Dot Tuer

Vacation

And what is a paradox, most often, if not the account of a phenomenon identical to one declared to be true, but whose point of view, alone, was changed?

—Victor Ségalen, “Pensers païens”¹

During a recent voyage through France's Massif Central, the road was blocked at Saint-Flour by a sign: DÉVIATION : AU BOUT DU MONDE [Deviation: To the End of the World]. Vacation, vacatio, vacatus, freedom, exemption, immunity, vacant—for a writer, an ideal (linked to the anxiety of the void): blank, desert, tabula rasa, zero degree. . .

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Imagine my joy to have found, in a restaurant in the Cantal, a wine from the Côtes d'Auvergne, *Les Demoiselles Oubliées du Donazat* [The Forgotten Maidens of Donazat]; and later, more profound, more troubling, somehow sadder, a wine of Gaillac, Domaine d'Escausses, *Cuvée de la Vigne de l'Oubli* [Growth of the Vine of Forgetfulness]. Baudelaire expressed it well, in the name of all great drinkers, past and future, from Dionysus through Rabelais, Verlaine, Rimbaud: "It is time to get drunk! In order not to be the martyred slaves of Time, get ceaselessly drunk!"² Wine is an epistemological drug, for drunkenness leads to the negation of time and the transformation of space, to true vacation.

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There are forgotten tales and tales of forgetting. In contrast with an *ars memoriae*, Umberto Eco asks whether it is possible to create an *ars oblivionalis*, an art of forgetting. The response is negative: insofar as all mnemotechnics constitutes a semiotics, such is a means of creating presence, where each signifying gesture produces a mental effect. "If the arts of memory are semiotics, it is not possible to construct arts of forgetting on their model, because a semiotics is by definition a mechanism that presents something to the mind and therefore a mechanism for producing intentional acts."³ He concludes that one cannot forget by lack, through annulling, but only by excess; one cannot forget through the multiplication of absences, but by the proliferation of presences.

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Jean Boudou, in *Le livre de Catoïe* (written in the nearly forgotten langue d'oc, Old Provençal, thus particularly inscribed in his region of the Lot valley), ends chapter 17: "Towards noon we arrived near Jonqueviel." He then begins chapter 18: "We did not go to Jonqueviel. In fact, there is no Jonqueviel. We went to La Combe. La Combe de Jonqueviel. Like Énergues d'Andouque or Bourgnounac de Mirandol. For the Albigenians, the souls of the dead follow the living. The ghosts move from the old house to the new one. Similarly, every new village is accompanied by its fantom-village, as by a shadow."⁴

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Les Angles, les Baraques, la Baume, la Belle, la Bouteille, le Bousquet, le Buisson, Lacalm, la Caprice, Chantegrenouille, Cocural, la Combe, Cultures, Hontes-Bas, Hontes-Haut, la Joyeuse, les Maisons, les Places, les 4 Chemins, les 4 Routes, Sage, la Salesse, Sauvages, la Serre, la Tricherie. [The

Angles, The Shanties, The Balm, The Beauty, The Bottle, The Thicket, The Bush, The Calm, The Caprice, Frogson, Cuckolder, The Dale, Cultures, Lower-Shames, Upper-Shames, The Joyful, The Houses, The Places, The 4 Paths, The 4 Roads, Wise, The Dirtied, Savages, The Hothouse, The Trickery.] These village and place names—generic, deficient in information, minimally inspired (however charming)—were destined to fall into oblivion. One should not forget that a place name [*lieu dit*] consists of a place and a name, as Proust revealed in the sections of his *Recherche* entitled, “*Noms de pays : le nom*” [Names of the Country: The Name] and “*Noms de pays : le pays*” [Names of the Country: The Country]. The study of toponymy suggests that the source of place names usually indicates either historic or topographic values: most often, the topography remains while the history is erased. It is precisely within this interstice—through deformed, transformed, forgotten histories, contrasted with the weighty presences of things, people and places—that the Proustian narrative is constructed. . . and that the essence of vacations arises. Every presumed equivalence between onomastics and ontology is deceptive.

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That wooden roadsign—SAINT-URCIZE—written in who’s hand?, weather worn and fallen into the grass: I seek that former village, and not the one several kilometers before me.

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Jean Boudou wrote: “In our house, time does not change. Here, the clock always chimes the ancient hour.”⁵ There is no new hour; the soul of the house cannot travel towards a new house; every change will be the end of an epoch, an apocalypse; every voyage, an uprooting; every future, death. Rootedness provokes forgetting, the forgetting of history.

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In the Aubrac, where the major “industry” is hiking (an activity often threatened by the presence of particularly vicious dogs), I asked an artisan who creates fine handmade staffs what to do if one is fearful of being bitten by a dog. He queried: “Before or after?”

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In an article entitled, “How to Live With Stones,” John Berger explains (in the context of the dry, rocky, megalithic landscape of Antonio Gramsci’s childhood, which contains innumerable piles of stones fashioned from those gathered to clear the fields, as well as thousands of neolithic stone towers): “To place a stone upright so that it stands vertical is an act of symbolic recognition: the stone becomes a presence: a dialogue begins.”⁶ The landscape of the Aubrac is equally stone-strewn, and also contains many mounds of gathered stones, tumuli, and vertical “statues,” stone set upon stone. Symbolic, indeed; but silent, empty symbols, irretrievable from the depths of oblivion.

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Yes, there is an art of forgetting, as there is an art of memory: they are both called history.

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Notes

- 1 Victor Ségalen, "Pensers païens" (1906), *Voyages au pays du réel: Oeuvres littéraires* (Paris, Éditions Complexe, 1995), 132.
- 2 Charles Baudelaire, "Petits poèmes en prose," *Paradis artificiels* (Paris, Flammarion, 1966), 188.
- 3 Umberto Eco, "Ars Oblivionalis?, Forget It", *PMLA*, Vol. 102, No. 3 (1988), 259.
- 4 Jean Boudou, *Le livre de Catoïe* (1966; Rodez, Éditions du Rouergue, 1993), 83–84.
- 5 *ibid*, 44.
- 6 John Berger, "How to Live With Stones," *HEAT No. 8* (Artarmon, Australia, 1998), 9.

— Allen S. Weiss

Versions

I used to think disco sucked and now I can listen to KC and the Sunshine Band. I don't think any alien being of any kind has visited the earth. I think Lee Harvey Oswald was exactly the patsy he claimed to be. I think Christianity ought to be big enough to withstand a little blasphemy, a little cowardung on the Virgin Mary. I think car alarms should only ring on the owner's keychain, like a beeper. But then again, who's to say.

"Fellah, you don't know *what* this story means."

These are the words newspaper editor Hume Cronyn speaks to reporter Warren Beatty in Alan J. Pakula's 1974 film *The Parallax View*. Beatty is trying to convince Cronyn that a group called The Parallax Corporation is in the business of recruiting disenfranchised loners to train as political assassins. The editor trusts his reporter's instincts but is confounded at the wholesale ambiguity of the proposition.

His retort above becomes the truest line in the film and a perfect slogan for the twentieth century.

"Parallax" is a scientific term which refers to the relative apparent positions of objects, like stars, produced by a shift in the position of the observer. It is a term used in different scientific techniques to measure distance. Trigonometric parallax, for example, refers to the apparent displacement of a nearby star against the background of more distant bodies, resulting from the motion of the earth around the sun. So, "parallax" is a term used to refer to the *apparent position of things*.

In photographic terms, a "parallax view" is the difference between the area taken in by a camera lens and the area taken in by the camera's viewfinder. This becomes a most alluring definition because it implies that

there is an everpresent viewpoint that is not seen, a perspective that is directly before us, and is real, but remains hidden in plain sight. It also implies that those versions and perspectives that are not hidden from view are, ultimately, only descriptions of apparent positions.

Everything about the past century—its historical events, its burgeoning media and technology—has provided fertile ground to feed the battlefield of apparent positions.

Pakula's film appeared a decade after the assassination of JFK (an event with its own endless layers of parallax views, a moment in history which can find no point of rest. It is the story that keeps on giving, which would infer that perhaps a more appropriate slogan for the century be "That's entertainment!") and it played as adroitly into the burgeoning sense of public cynicism as it did with issues of both the revision and redemption of history. The film's final shot inclines toward this impulse for the truth as Beatty's reporter runs through a dark hall toward the blinding light of a slowly closing door. He makes it to the door before it closes. A gunshot. The end. If he learns the truth, we never hear of it. Fellahs, we still don't know what this story means.

In an essay called "Versions," which recounts the varied descriptions of the shooting of Andy Warhol and curator Mario Amaya, Ihor Holubizky begins by quoting from a George Kubler book called *The Shape of Time*. In referring to the narrative historian, Kubler points out that "history cuts anywhere with equal ease, and a good story can begin anywhere the teller chooses." History, then, is all versions and everything about this past century bears that out. With an explosion of media and technology, we write the various versions of history as quickly as we live them. It is a scenario that can confuse and confound, leaving us with little more than a riddle inside an enigma inside something else. But the clash of versions, of apparent positions, has also brought to the surface histories previously submerged, such as those of women and indigenous cultures worldwide, a partial redemption of history from its own apparent positions. We have begun the process of saving history from itself.

And still these various routes often bring us no closer to the truth which, according to popular culture, remains "out there" somewhere. In 1962, Thomas Kuhn wrote *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* which described how science in no way pursued a linear path to the truth. Instead, each substantive discovery—say, gravity—effected a paradigm shift whose effects and influence were total. Our journey forward is far more an erratic avenue winding through continually-reconfigured versions of the world.

Versions are not just history, but everything in history. Versions are all art, a weekend painter or Andy Kaufman. Advertisers have their versions. Even atrocious poets have their versions. I was originally going to suggest that versions are all we have.

But maybe all we *really* have is the parallax view, the space between versions. Where it all happens.

—John Massier

Vision

“Splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass.” {Theodor Adorno}

—Paul Kelley

Excerpted from “Reflections from a Damaged Life,” *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974), 50.

Vocation

Training valued by Conservative governments. Opposite of vacation.

—Janine Marchessault

VR

I see nothing. A voice asks me to hold up my gloved hand. Wavering before me is a free-floating drawing of a hand. “Make a fist.” I do. The drawing waits, makes a fist. “Now extend the first finger, . . . now the next, . . . the next . . . and next . . . finally the thumb.” I perform, the drawing performs. “Calibration seems okay.” My virtual hand is ready.

Virtual reality (VR) seems highly charged. It represents a technological constellation of ideas—full of many contradictions and dilemmas. One of the most provocative issues manifested by VR is the contradictory treatment of the body. On the one hand, it offers an implicit promise of omnipotence as an idealized, bodiless “experience.” On the other hand, the actual body itself is almost sensory-deprived, as if submitting to some kind of medical testing. I virtually fly like superwoman, zoom through walls unscathed, scale myself down to play with molecular structure, grab worlds and change them to my point of view, yet my flesh is in bondage and my senses are blinded. This reconstruction of the mind/body split is puzzling to say the least, since it is an outdated paradigm in science and unfashionable in conventional medical circles.

As number of proponents would say, VR promises a freedom that is limited only by our imaginations and, furthermore, that the artificial sensorium we can create for ourselves will be more satisfying than our relationships with the real world. A spectator (participant) is promised mastery of a realm of creation (or destruction, as seen in the Gulf War

media coverage), a realm of the mind—seemingly abstract, cool, clean and bloodless, idealistic, pure, perhaps part of the spirit, that can leave behind the messy, troublesome body and the ruined material world. Far from being left behind, however, the flesh forms the essential site of VR. It is the site of fictions made material, fictions which are the images of our subjectivity—how we know what we are.

—Catherine Richards

Excerpted from “Virtual Bodies,” *Public 11: Throughput*, 1995.

War Game



—Lynne Cohen

Web-Cam

Web-Cam, or live video feed to the Internet, is an ideal symbol of the erosion of privacy, the eradication of individual control over private space that marks our electronic information society at the end of the millenium. The type of Web-cam postings doing so, which are real-life precursors to two predictable Hollywood narratives telling of media-controlled lives, *The Truman Show* and *Ed TV*, are best represented by the *Jenni-cam* site. Having received mass media attention over three years ago, this site is the first to be well-known, and, therefore, has many imitators. Jenni puts non-censored cameras in the bedroom and living room of her Manhattan apartment. Guests and members of her Web site can look in and “interact” in her private life, especially upon reading such insightful notes to her fans as, “Yikes! Allergy season.”

Her efforts could suggest that individuals are able to regulate privacy, take it into their hands and re-define private space past bourgeois notions of autonomy and propriety. This is commendable. In fact, it recalls how much art of the seventies, performance, film and video art of a conceptual and often feminist bent, has taken cues from Marxist thought and broke down private/public boundaries.

However, the missing part of the equation that problematizes Jenni-cam and similar efforts (incidentally, most of these pioneering Web-Cam sites have been made by women, possibly because the potential audience,