

THE EVIL DEMON OF IMAGES

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A propos the cinema and images in general (media images, technological images), I would like to conjure up the perversity of the relation between the image and its referent, the supposed real; the virtual and irreversible confusion of the sphere of images and the sphere of a reality whose nature we are less and less able to grasp. There are many modalities of this absorption, this confusion, this diabolical seduction of images. Above all, it is the reference principle of images which must be doubted, this strategy by means of which they always appear to refer to a real world, to real objects, and to reproduce something which is logically and chronologically anterior to themselves. None of this is true. As simulacra, images precede the real to the extent that they invert the causal and logical order of the real and its reproduction. Benjamin, in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', already pointed out strongly this modern revolution in the order of production (of reality, of meaning) by the precession, the anticipation of its reproduction.

It is precisely when it appears most truthful, most faithful and most in conformity to reality that the image is most diabolical -- and our

technical images, whether they be from photography, cinema or television, are in the overwhelming majority much more 'figurative', 'realist', than all the images from past cultures. It is in its resemblance, not only analogical but technological, that the image is most immoral and most perverse.

The appearance of the mirror already introduced into the world of perception an ironical effect of *trompe-l'oeil*, and we know what malefice was attached to the appearance of doubles. But this is also true of all the images which surround us: in general, they are analysed according to their value as representations, as media of presence and meaning. The immense majority of present day photographic, cinematic and television images are thought to bear witness to the world with a naive resemblance and a touching fidelity. We have spontaneous confidence in their realism. We are wrong. They only seem to resemble things, to resemble reality, events, faces. Or rather, they really do conform, but their conformity itself is diabolical.

We can find a sociological, historical and political equivalent to this diabolical conformity, to this evil demon of conformity, in the modern behaviour of the masses who are also very good at complying with the models offered to them, who are very good at reflecting the objectives imposed on them, thereby absorbing and annihilating them. There is in this conformity a force of seduction in the literal sense of the word, a force of diversion, distortion, capture and

ironic fascination. There is a kind of fatal strategy of conformity.

A recent example may be found in Woody Allen's film, *Zelig*: in trying to be oneself, to cultivate difference and originality, one ends up resembling everyone and no longer seducing anyone. This is the logic of present day psychological conformity. Zelig, on the other hand, is launched on an adventure of total seduction, in an involuntary strategy of global seduction: he begins to resemble everything which approaches him, everything which surrounds him. Nor is this the mimetic violence of defiance or parody, it is the mimetic non-violence of seduction. To begin to resemble the other, to take on their appearance, is to seduce them, since it is to make them enter the realm of metamorphosis despite themselves.

This seductive force, this fatal strategy, is a kind of animal genie or talent -- not simply that of the chameleon, which is only its anecdotal form. It is not the conformism of animals which delights us; on the contrary, animals are never conformist, they are seductive, they always appear to result from a metamorphosis. Precisely because they are not individuals, they pose the enigma of their resemblance. If an animal knows how to conform, it is not to its own being, its own individuality (banal strategy), but to appearances in the world. This is what Zelig does too with his animal genie -- he is polymorphous (but not perverse); he is incapable of functional adaptation to contexts, which is true conformism, our conformism, but able to

seduce by the *play* of resemblance. Savages do no less when they put on the successive masks of their gods, when they 'become' their successive divinities -- this is also to seduce them. It is of course against this strategy of seduction that psychiatry struggles, and it is what gives rise to the magical infatuation of the crowds for Zelig (in German, *Selig* means 'blessed').

The remarkable thing about this film is that it leads astray all possible interpretations. There is thus also a seduction of interpretation, with the complicity of certain intellectuals, as well as a polymorphous montage technique which allows it to ironically adapt to all possibilities.

More generally, the image is interesting not only in its role as reflection, mirror, representation of, or counterpart to, the real, but also when it begins to contaminate reality and to model it, when it only conforms to reality the better to distort it, or better still: when it appropriates reality for its own ends, when it anticipates it to the point that the real no longer has time to be produced as such.

It is not only daily life which has become cinematographic and televisual, but war as well. It has been said that war is the continuation of politics by other means; we can also say that images, media images, are the continuation of war by other means. Take *Apocalypse Now*. Coppola made his film the same way the Americans conducted the war -- in this sense, it is the best possible testimony -- with the same exaggeration, the same excessive means, the

same monstrous candour ... and the same success. War as a trip, a technological and psychedelic fantasy; war as a succession of special effects, the war become film well before it was shot; war replaced by technological testing. For the Americans, it was above all the latter: a test site, an enormous field on which to test their weapons, their methods, their power.

Coppola does the same thing: he tests the power of intervention of cinema, tests the impact of cinema become a vast machine of special effects. In this sense his film is very much the prolongation of war by other means, the completion of that incomplete war, its apotheosis. War becomes film, film becomes war, the two united by their mutual overflow of technology.

The real war was conducted by Coppola in the manner of Westmoreland. Leaving aside the clever irony of napalming Philippine forests and villages to recreate the hell of South Vietnam, everything is replayed, begun again through cinema: the Molochian joy of the shoot, the sacrificial joy of so many millions spent, of such a holocaust of means, of so many difficulties, and the dazzling paranoia in the mind of the creator who, from the beginning, conceived this film as a *world* historical event for which the Vietnam war would have been no more than a pretext, would ultimately not have existed -- and we cannot deny it: 'in itself' the Vietnam war never happened, perhaps it was only a dream, a baroque dream of napalm and the tropics, a psycho-tropic dream in which the issue was not

politics or victory but the sacrificial, excessive deployment of a power already filming itself as it unfolds, perhaps expecting nothing more than consecration by a superfilm, which perfects the war's function as a mass spectacle.

No real distance, no critical direction, no desire for any 'raised consciousness' in relation to the war: in a sense this is the brutal quality of the film, not to be undermined by any anti-war moral psychology. Coppola may very well dress up his helicopter captain in a cavalry hat and have him wipe out a Vietnamese village to the sound of Wagner -- these are not critical, distant signs; they are immersed in the machinery, part of the special effect. Coppola makes films in the same manner, with the same nostalgic megalomania, with the same non-signifying fury, the same magnified Punch and Judy effect. One can ask, how is such a horror possible (not the war, properly speaking, but that of the film)? But there is no response, no possible judgement. The Vietnam war and the film are cut from the same cloth, nothing separates them: this film is part of the war. If the Americans (apparently) lost the other, they have certainly won this one. *Apocalypse Now* is a global victory. It has a cinematographic power equal and superior to that of the military and industrial complexes, of the Pentagon and governments. Nothing is understood in relation to war or cinema (at least the latter) unless one has grasped this indistinguishability -- which is not the ideological or moral indistinguishability of good and evil, but that of the reversibility of destruction and production, of the immanence of

something in its very revolution, of the organic metabolism of every technology, from carpet bombing to film stock...

As for the anticipation of reality by images, the precession of images and media in relation to events, such that the connection between cause and effect becomes scrambled and it becomes impossible to tell which is the effect of the other -- what better example than the nuclear accident at Harrisburg, a 'real' incident which happened just after the release of *The China Syndrome*? This film is a fine example of the supremacy of the televised event over the nuclear event which itself remains improbable and in some sense imaginary.

Moreover, the film unintentionally shows this: it is the intrusion of TV into the reactor which as it were triggers the nuclear incident -- because it is the anticipation and model of it in the day to day world: telefission of the real and of the real world -- because TV and information in general are a kind of catastrophe in René Thom's formal, topological sense: a radical, qualitative change in an entire system. Or rather, TV and nuclear power are of the same kind: behind the 'hot' and nentropic concepts of energy and information, they have the same dissuasive force as cold systems. TV is also a nuclear, chain-reactive process, but implosive: it cools and neutralises the meaning and energy of events. Thus, behind the presumed risk of explosion, that is, of hot catastrophe, the nuclear conceals a long, cold catastrophe -- the universalisation of a system of dissuasion, of deterrence.

The homology between nuclear power and television can be read directly in the images. Nothing resembles the command and control centre of the reactor more than the TV studios, and the nuclear consoles share the same imaginary as the recording and broadcasting studios. Everything happens between these two poles: the other core, that of the reactor, in principal the real core of the affair, remains concealed from us, like the real, buried and indecipherable, ultimately of no importance. The drama is acted out on the screens and nowhere else.

Harrisburg, Watergate and *Network* form the trilogy of *The China Syndrome* -- an inextricable trilogy in which we cannot tell which is the effect or the symptom of the others: is the ideological argument (the Watergate effect) only the symptom of the nuclear (the Harrisburg effect) or the informational model (the *Network* effect)? -- is the real (Harrisburg) only the symptom of the imaginary (*Network*, *The China Syndrome*) or vice versa? Marvellous indistinguishability, ideal constellation of simulation.

The conjunction of *The China Syndrome* and Harrisburg haunts us. But is it so involuntary? Without examining any magical links between simulacrum and reality, it is clear that *The China Syndrome* is not unrelated to the 'real' accident at Harrisburg, not by a causal logic but by those relations of contagion and unspoken analogy which link the real, models and simulacra: the induction of the nuclear incident at Harrisburg by the film corresponds, with

disquieting obviousness, to the induction of the incident by TV in the film. A strange precession of a film before the real, the most astonishing we have seen: reality corresponding point by point to the simulacra, even down to the suspenseive, incomplete character of the catastrophe, which is essential from the point of view of dissuasion: the real so arranged itself, in the image of the film, as to produce a *simulation* of catastrophe.

It is only a further step, which we should briskly take, to reverse our logical order and see *The China Syndrome* as the real event and Harrisburg its simulacrum. For it is by the same logic that the nuclear reality in the film follows from the television effect and Harrisburg in 'reality' follows from the cinema effect of *The China Syndrome*.

But the latter is not the original prototype of Harrisburg; one is not the simulacrum and the other the reality: there are only simulacra, and Harrisburg is a kind of simulation in the second degree. There is indeed a chain reaction; but *it is not the nuclear chain reaction but that of the simulacra* and of the simulation in which all the energy of the real is effectively engulfed, not in a spectacular nuclear explosion but in a secret and continuous implosion, which is perhaps taking a more deadly turn than all the explosions which presently lull us.

For an explosion is always a promise, it is our hope: see how much, in the film as well as at Harrisburg, everyone expects it to go up, that destruction speak its name and deliver us from

this unnameable panic, from this invisible nuclear panic of dissuasion. Let the 'core' of the reactor expose at last its glowing power of destruction, let it reassure us as to the admittedly catastrophic presence of energy and gratify us with its spectacle. For the problem is that there is no nuclear spectacle, no spectacle of nuclear energy in itself (Hiroshima is past): it is for this reason that it is rejected -- it would be perfectly accepted if it lent itself to spectacle like earlier forms of energy. Parousia of catastrophe: substantial boost to our messianic libido.

But that will never recur. What will happen will never be explosion but implosion. Never again will we see energy in its spectacular and pathetic form -- all the romanticism of explosion which had so much charm, since it was also that of revolution -- but only the cold energy of simulacra and its distillation in homeopathic doses into the cold systems of information.

What else does the media dream of if not raising up events by its very presence? Everyone deplors it, but everyone is secretly fascinated by this eventuality. Such is the logic of simulacra: no longer divine predestination, but the precession of models, which is no less inexorable. And it is for this reason that events no longer have any meaning: not because they are insignificant in themselves, but because they have been preceded by models with which their own process can only coincide.

For some time now, in the dialectical relation

between reality and images (that is, the relation that we wish to believe dialectical, readable from the real to the image and vice versa), the image has taken over and imposed its own immanent, ephemeral logic; an immoral logic without depth, beyond good and evil, beyond truth and falsity; a logic of the extermination of its own referent, a logic of the implosion of meaning in which the message disappears on the horizon of the medium. In this regard, we all remain incredibly naive: we always look for a good usage of the image, that is to say a moral, meaningful, pedagogic or informational usage, without seeing that the image in a sense revolts against this good usage, that it is the conductor neither of meaning nor good intentions, but on the contrary of an implosion, a denegation of meaning (of events, history, memory, etc.). I am reminded of *Holocaust*, the television series on the concentration camps...

Forgetting the extermination is part of the extermination itself. That forgetting, however, is still too dangerous and must be replaced by an artificial memory (everywhere, today, it is artificial memories which obliterate people's memories, which obliterate people from memory). This artificial memory replays the extermination -- but too late for it to profoundly unsettle anything, and above all it does so via a medium which is itself cold, radiating oblivion, dissuasion and extermination in an even more systematic manner, if this is possible, than the camps themselves. TV, the veritable final solution to the historicity of every event. The Jews are recycled not through the crematory

ovens or the gas chambers but through the sound track and images, through the cathode tube and the micro-chip. Forgetting, annihilation thereby achieves at last an aesthetic dimension -- nostalgia gives them their final finish.

Henceforth, "everyone knows", everyone has trembled before the extermination -- a sure sign that "it" will never happen again. But in effect what is thus exorcised so cheaply, at the cost of a few tears, will never recur because it is presently happening in the very form through which it is denounced, through the very medium of this supposed exorcism: television. The same process of forgetting, of liquidation, of extermination, the same annihilation of memories and of history, the same inverse, implosive radiation, the same absorption without trace, the same black hole as Auschwitz. They want us to believe that TV will remove the mortgage of Auschwitz by raising collective consciousness, whereas it is the perpetuation of it in a different guise, under the auspices not of a *site* of annihilation but a *medium* of dissuasion.

What everyone fails to understand is that *Holocaust* is above all (and exclusively) a *televised* event or rather object (McLuhan's fundamental rule which must not be forgotten). That is to say, it is an attempt to reheat a *cold* historical event -- tragic but cold, the first great event of cold systems, those cooling systems of dissuasion and extermination which were subsequently deployed in other forms (including the Cold War, etc.) and in relation to the cold

masses (the Jews no longer even concerned by their own death, eventually self-managing it, no longer even masses in revolt: dissuaded unto death, dissuaded even of their own death). To reheat this cold event via a cold medium, television, for masses who are themselves cold, who will only find in it the occasion for a tactile chill and a posthumous emotion, a dissuasive shiver, which sends them into oblivion with a kind of aesthetic good faith.

The cold light of television is inoffensive to the imagination (even that of children) since it no longer carries any imaginary, for the simple reason that *it is no longer an image*.

In this sense the TV image has to be placed in opposition to the cinema, which still carries an intense imaginary. Although it is contaminated more and more by TV, the cinema is still an image -- that means not only a screen and a visual form but a myth, something that belongs to the sphere of the double, the phantasm, the mirror, the dream, etc... Nothing of that in the TV image, which doesn't suggest anything and has a magnetic effect. The TV image is only a screen. More than that: a miniaturized terminal located in your head and *you* are the screen and the TV looks at you, goes through you like a magnetic tape -- a tape, not an image.

Thus, properly speaking it is *Holocaust* the television film which constitutes the definitive holocaust event. Likewise, with *The Day After* it is not the atomic conflict depicted in the film but the film itself which is the catastrophic event.

This film should inspire a salutary terror, it should dissuade by the spectacle of terror. However, I don't see anything as a result of this film. The slides at the New York Museum of Natural History move me much more profoundly: you can shiver at the ice age and feel the charm of the prehistoric, but here I feel neither the shiver nor the charm of nuclear power, nor even suspense nor the final blinding flash.

Is it a bad film? Certainly. But isn't it rather that all this is unimaginable? Isn't it rather that, in our imaginary, nuclear conflict is a total event, without appeal and with no tomorrow, whereas here it simply brings about a regression of the human race according to the worst naive stereotypes of savagery? But we already know that state, indeed we have barely left it. Our desire is rather for something which no longer takes place on a human scale, for some anterior or ulterior mystery: what will the earth be like when we are no longer on it? In a word, we dream of our disappearance, and of seeing the world in its inhuman purity (which is precisely not the state of nature).

But these limits, these extremes that we imagine, this catastrophe -- can it be metaphorised in images? It is not certain that its mythical evocation is possible, any more than that of our bio-molecular destiny or that of the genetic code, which is the other dimension, the corollary of the nuclear. We can no longer be affected by it -- proof that we have already been irradiated! Already to our minds the catastrophe

is no more than a comic strip. Its filmic projection is only a diversion from the real nuclearisation of our lives. The real nuclear catastrophe has already happened, it happens every day, and this film is part of it. It is *it* which is our catastrophe. It does not represent it, it does not evoke it, on the contrary it shows that it has already happened, that it is already here, since it is impossible to imagine.

For all these reasons I do not believe in a pedagogy of images, nor of cinema, nor *a fortiori* in one of television. I do not believe in a dialectic between image and reality, nor therefore, in respect of images, in a pedagogy of message and meaning. The secret of the image (we are still speaking of contemporary, technical images) must not be sought in its differentiation from reality, and hence in its representative value (aesthetic, critical or dialectical), but on the contrary in its 'telescoping' into reality, its short-circuit with reality, and finally, in the implosion of image and reality. For us there is an increasingly definitive lack of differentiation between image and reality which no longer leaves room for representation as such.

This collusion between images and life, between the screen and daily life, can be experienced everyday in the most ordinary manner. Especially in America, not the least charm of which is that even outside the cinemas the whole country is cinematographic. You cross the desert as if in a western; the metropolis is a continual screen of signs and formulae. Life is a travelling shot, a kinetic, cinematic, cinematographic.

graphic sweep. There is as much pleasure in this as in those Dutch or Italian towns where, upon leaving the museum, you rediscover a town in the very image of the paintings, as if it had stepped out of them. It is a kind of miracle which, even in a banal American way, gives rise to a sort of aesthetic form, to an ideal confusion which transfigures life, as in a dream. Here, cinema does not take on the exceptional form of a work of art, even a brilliant one, but invests the whole of life with a mythical ambience. Here it becomes truly exciting. This is why the idolatry of stars, the cult of Hollywood idols, is not a media pathology but a glorious form of the cinema, its mythical transfiguration, perhaps the last great myth of our modernity. Precisely to the extent that the idol no longer represents anything but reveals itself as a pure, impassioned, contagious image which effaces the difference between the real being and its assumption into the imaginary.

All these considerations are a bit wild, but that is because they correspond to the unrestrained film buff that I am and have always wished to remain -- that is in a sense uncultured and fascinated. There is a kind of primal pleasure, of anthropological joy in images, a kind of brute fascination unencumbered by aesthetic, moral, social or political judgements. It is because of this that I suggest they are immoral, and that their fundamental power lies in this immorality.

This brute fascination for images, above and beyond all moral or social determination, is also not that of dreaming or the imaginary,

understood in the traditional sense. Other images, such as those in painting, drawing, theatre or architecture, have been better able to make us dream or imagine; other modes of expression as well (undoubtedly language makes us dream better than the image). So there is something more than that which is peculiar to our modern media images: if they fascinate us so much it is not because they are sites of the production of meaning and representation -- this would not be new -- it is on the contrary because they are sites of the *disappearance* of meaning and representation, sites in which we are caught quite apart from any judgement of reality, thus sites of a fatal strategy of denegation of the real and of the reality principle.

We have arrived at a paradox regarding the image, our images, those which unfurl upon and invade our daily life -- images whose proliferation, it should be noted, is potentially infinite, whereas the extension of meaning is always limited precisely by its end, by its finality: from the fact that images ultimately have no finality and proceed by total contiguity, infinitely multiplying themselves according to an irresistible epidemic process which no one today can control, our world has become truly infinite, or rather exponential by means of images. It is caught up in a mad pursuit of images, in an ever greater fascination which is only accentuated by video and digital images. We have thus come to the paradox that these images describe the equal impossibility of the real and of the imaginary.

For us the medium, the image medium, has imposed itself between the real and the imaginary, upsetting the balance between the two, with a kind of fatality which has its own logic. I call this a fatal process in the sense that there is a definitive immanence of the image, without any possible transcendent meaning, without any possible dialectic of history -- fatal also in the sense not merely of an exponential, linear unfolding of images and messages but of an exponential enfolding of the medium around itself. The fatality lies in this endless enwrapping of images (literally: without end, without destination) which leaves images no other destiny than images. The same thing happens everywhere today, when production has no destiny apart from production -- overdetermination of production by itself -- when sex has no destiny other than sex -- sexual overdetermination of sexuality. This process may be found everywhere today, for better and for worse. In the absence of rules of the game, things become caught up in their own game: images become more real than the real; cinema itself becomes more cinema than cinema, in a kind of vertigo in which (to return to our initial problem, that of resemblance) it does no more than resemble itself and escape in its own logic, in the very perfection of its own model.

I am thinking of those exact, scrupulous set-pieces such as *Chinatown*, *The Day of the Condor*, *Barry Lyndon*, *1900*, *All the President's Men*, the very perfection of which is disturbing. It is as if we were dealing with perfect remakes, with extraordinary montages which belong

more to a combinatory process (or mosaic in the McLuhanesque sense), with large photo, kino or historio-synthetic machines, rather than with real films. Let us be clear: their quality is not in question. The problem is rather that they leave us somehow totally indifferent.

Take *The Last Picture Show*. You need only be sufficiently distracted, as I was, to see it as a 1950s original production: a good film of manners and the ambience of small town America, etc. A slight suspicion: it was a little too good, better adjusted, better than the others, without the sentimental, moral and psychological tics of the films of that period. Astonishment at the discovery that it is a 1970s film, perfectly nostalgic, brand new, retouched, a hyperrealist restitution of a 50s film. There is talk of remaking silent films, doubtless better than those of the period. A whole generation of films is appearing which will be to those we have known what the android is to man: marvellous, flawless artifacts, dazzling simulacra which lack only an imaginary and that particular hallucination which makes cinema what it is. Most of those that we see today (the best) are already of this order. *Barry Lyndon* is the best example: no better has been made, no better will be made, but *what exactly?* Evocation? No, not even evocation but *simulation*. All the toxic radiation has been filtered out, all the ingredients are present in precise doses, not a single mistake.

Cool, cold pleasure which is not even aesthetic properly speaking: functional pleasure,

equational pleasure, pleasure of machination. We need only think of Visconti (*The Leopard*, *Senso*, etc., which recall *Barry Lyndon* in certain respects) in order to grasp the difference, not only in style but in the cinematographic act. With Visconti, there is meaning, history, a sensual rhetoric, dead moments, a passionate game, not only in the historical content but in the direction. None of that with Kubrick, who controls his film like a chessboard, and makes history an operational scenario. Nor does this refer back to the old opposition between finesse and geometry: there meaning was still in play, meaning was at stake. Whereas we are entering into an era of films which no longer have meaning properly speaking, large synthetic machines with variable geometry.

Is there already something of this in Sergio Leone's westerns? Perhaps. All registers tend in this direction. *Chinatown* is the detective story redesigned by laser. It is not really a question of perfection. Technical perfection can belong to the meaning, and in this case it is neither nostalgic nor hyperrealist; it is an effect of art. Here, it is an effect of model: it is one of the tactical reference values. In the absence of any real syntax of meaning there are only tactical values in a complex whole in which, for example, the CIA as an all-purpose mythological machine, Robert Redford as a polyvalent star, social relations as necessary references to history, and technical virtuosity as a necessary reference to cinema are all admirably combined.

Cinema and its trajectory: from the most fantastic or mythical to the realistic and hyperrealistic.

In its present endeavours cinema increasingly approaches, with ever increasing perfection, absolute reality: in its banality, in its veracity, in its starkness, in its tedium, and at the same time in its pretentiousness, in its pretention to be the real, the immediate, the insignificant, which is the maddest of enterprises (in the same way that the pretention of functionalist design to designate, as the highest degree of the object, the form in which it coincides with its function, its use-value, is properly an insane enterprise). No culture has ever had this naive and paranoid, this puritanical and terrorist vision of signs. Terrorism is always of the real. Simultaneous with this attempt at absolute coincidence with the real, cinema also approaches an absolute coincidence with itself. This is not contradictory: it is the very definition of the hyperreal. Hypotyposis and specularity. Cinema plagiarises and copies itself, remakes its classics, retroactivates its original myths, remakes silent films more perfect than the originals, etc. All this is logical. *Cinema is fascinated by itself as a lost object just as it (and we) are fascinated by the real as a referential in perdition.* Previously there was a living, dialectical, full and dramatic relationship between cinema and the imaginary (that is, novelistic, mythical unreality, even down to the delirious use of its own technique). Today, there is an inverse negative relation between the cinema and reality: it results from the loss of

specificity which both have suffered. Cold collage, cool promiscuity, asexual engagement of two cold media which evolve in asymptotic line towards one another: cinema attempting to abolish itself in the absolute of reality, the real already long absorbed in cinematographic (or televised) hyperreality.

Translated by Paul Patton and Paul Foss