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The Show Must Go On: The Simulated Search for the Real in the Society of the Spectacle

What every society looks for in continuing to produce,
and to overproduce, is to restore the real that escapes it.
—Jean Baudrillard

The media representations of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon in Washington elicited reactions with rather unsettling ethical reverberations in the consciousness of both primary and secondary witnesses. On September 11, 2001, the witnesses’—and my own—seemingly outrageous aesthetic perception of images of utter destruction and unprecedented brutality inevitably raised the question of the impact that visual media, as producers of image commodities (TV news, films, advertisements, etc.), can have on the viewers’—the image consumers’—sense of identity in a “society of the spectacle” (Debord’s phrase). Arguing against Marcuse and Debord, who underscore the manipulative, oppressive, and life-negating qualities of images (whose social articulation is the spectacle), I concluded that “life as show time,”¹ as a comprehensive system of signs, codes, and messages, is the next, if not the only, best thing that can possibly happen to us—provided that we stay aware of the risks of unfreedom which it implies. Now, half a decade later, the controversial authenticity and meaningfulness of the world of images that we perceive as reality still invites the following

questions: If our sense of the real is just an artifact made up of a complex of images, can we still hope ever to repossess reality? What would happen if we ultimately found out that the real is in fact a place (condition, state of being) we are never supposed to know? Must the “show” go on only because, paradoxically, the more we wish for it to end—with a utopian or dystopian “unveiling” of the Real—the more we fear the return of an excess of meaning and, at the same time, the loss of a lot more convenient triviality? For Jean Baudrillard, we are past the moment of the society of the spectacle because of the loss of all referent: this is the world of simulacra and simulation,² or, as I will show in resonance with Slavoj Žižek, the world of *The Matrix*. According to Žižek, it is our “passion for the Real” (the thrill of reality) that might also prompt us to avoid it. A couple of thought-provoking motion pictures, Andy and Larry Wachowski’s *The Matrix* (1999)³ and Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* (1994),⁴ will lead my argument to the conclusion that our identity will be preserved only as long as, aware of the spectacle and its perils, we keep up our search for the Real.

Andy and Larry Wachowski’s *The Matrix* offers its viewers a scenario of gloom and doom: here, the spectacle has already escaped human control and is kept in place by human simulacra—virtual-reality creatures with deadly powers. The spectacle strikes back with a vengeance in this *film noir* that comes across almost as the perfect metaphor for that which Baudrillard calls “the extermination of the Real.” The true meaning of the phrase is, in fact, in Baudrillard’s own words, “the more fundamental extermination of the Illusion,” that is, “the radical and objective illusion of the world, the radical impossibility of a real presence of things or beings, their definitive absence from themselves.”⁵ It is this absence that the film’s protagonist, Thomas Anderson (Neo, by his hacker name), perceives intuitively, without being able to “put his finger” on it until he meets Morpheus, one of the leaders of the few humans still

living in “real” reality, in the world of “truth.” The following dialogue marks the beginning of Neo’s enlightenment and eventual recruitment by the rebels fighting the Matrix:

Morpheus: “The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. Even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out the window, or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.”

Neo: “What truth?”

Morpheus: “That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot taste, or smell, or touch. A prison... for your mind. Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself.”

The filmmakers themselves drop us a hint about the philosophical source of their work when, at the beginning of the film, Neo reaches into his cache of illegal software disks: the book with the hollow inside that he opens is entitled *Simulacra and Simulation* (on closer scrutiny, however, one may also notice that Baudrillard’s name is missing).

In disagreement with Baudrillard, Linda Hutcheon points out in her *Politics of Postmodernism* that “[t]he postmodern... is not a degeneration into hyperreality but a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it. It is not that representation now dominates or effaces the referent, but rather that it now self-consciously acknowledges its existence as representation—that is, as interpreting (indeed as creating) its referent, not as offering direct and immediate access to it.”⁶ However, I understand Hutcheon’s point more as a rephrasing, rather than a rebuttal, of Baudrillard’s theory: by creating its own referent, representation not only disguises but effectively annuls the “real” object. The mimetic movement loses its linear reflexivity and becomes self-reflexive: the metaphor of the mirror mirroring another mirror. Much the same thing happens when Morpheus takes Neo inside a computer programme:

Neo [touching a piece of furniture]: “This isn’t real?”

Morpheus: “What is ‘real’? How do you define ‘real’? If you’re talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, taste and see, then ‘real’ is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain. This is the world that you know. The world as it was at the end of the twentieth century. It exists now only as part of a neural-active simulation that we call the Matrix. You’ve been living in a dream world, Neo. This is the world as it exists today. Welcome to the desert of the real.”

In yet another scene, the turncoat Mr. Reagan (Cypher, by his hacker name) chooses the simple pleasures of the reality of the Matrix over the genuine bleakness of the “real” reality: “I know this steak doesn’t exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, do you know what I realize? [chewing on a piece of steak] Ignorance is bliss.” His choice will turn him into a traitor and cause a few losses of life in Morpheus’s camp.

Morpheus and Neo, their crew, and their fellow rebels in Zion, humanity’s last underground stronghold, have seemingly all escaped the perfect world of the spectacle and reinhabited the “Real.” However, according to Slavoj Žižek, to recognize this tendency of regaining “firm ground in some ‘real reality’” is to acknowledge only half the truth: “The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic / excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition.”⁷ Therefore, even if most of the rebels seem to feel perfectly at home in the “desert of the Real,” the cinema audience of *The Matrix*, on the other hand, might feel tempted to relate to Cypher, the traitor, rather than to the rebels’ cause. The nightmarish *film noir* impression comes less from the machines’ (the computer-generated) hunkydory reality than from Morpheus’s drab “real” reality. The lights and the cinematography of the Wachowski brothers’ film help to underscore this important distinction.

While Morpheus and his followers fight the reality of the Matrix by infiltrating it virtually from “real” reality, Mickey and Mallory in Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* explode the perfect world of the spectacle from the inside, reinserting into it the violence of death. To use Guy Debord’s phrase, Mickey and Mallory “decolonize” the social. “The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life,” writes Debord. “It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see—commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity.”⁸ Indeed, Oliver Stone keeps reminding us that his protagonists are very much the products of a society lived as spectacle by inserting television images of violence and fear, news reports of disasters, accidents, and crimes, and alternating with commercials throughout all of his filmic narrative. The society of the spectacle has banished death and everything related to it, like old age, illnesses, murder, war, etc. for quite a long time now. As Walter Benjamin also remarks, “It has been observable for a number of centuries how in the general consciousness the thought of death has declined in omnipresence and vividness.”⁹ As a result, the demand for the thrill of death, or, for the *frisson* of the real (to use Baudrillard’s phrase from *The Spirit of Terrorism*)¹⁰ has been growing accordingly. It is not that anybody would wish to die—although Freud sounds quite convincing about exactly the opposite in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—and yet, most of us crave the experience of death by proxy: to die and continue living. In Benjamin’s words, “What draws the reader to the novel [and *mutatis mutandis*, the TV-viewer or filmgoer to the screen] is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about [or watches].”¹¹

In *Natural Born Killers*, Wayne Gale, the reporter/producer of the widely successful TV-show *American Maniacs*, satisfies his viewers’ demand for violence by re-enacting real murders.

We also learn that sometimes the re-enactment of a murder case on Wayne's show becomes, instead, the anticipation of one. Wayne's cynical attitude is unequivocal:

Do you think that those nitwits out there in *Zombie Land* remember anything? This is junk food for the brains. It's, you know, filler. Fodder. Whatever [...] And keep saying that word: 'Live Interview with Wayne Gale!' Anticipation, baby. That's what it's all about.

Similarly, in an attempt to parody the parody, Oliver Stone "re-enacts" for us, so to speak, Mallory's youth, in sitcom-style flashbacks, with audible audience reactions: sighs, laughter, etc. The incongruity of the sitcom form and its content—which includes domestic violence, sexual abuse, foul language, etc.—is meant to blur the borderline between medium (television) and real life (Mallory's youth); moreover, the film's message is that the medium is, in fact, life, and life outside of the medium would be non-life, or the ultimate truth—which is none other than death.

Even with the risk of taking one of Baudrillard's ideas out of context, I cannot help noticing that Mickey and Mallory almost literally heed the philosopher's call: "Against the extermination of evil, of death, of illusion, against this Perfect Crime, we must fight for the criminal imperfection of the world."¹² Interviewed on national television by Wayne, Mickey makes it quite clear that he considers himself a kind of crusader in reestablishing the "criminal" imperfection of the world:

Mickey: "You'll never understand, Wayne. You and me, we're not even the same species. I used to be you, then I evolved. From where you're standing, you're a man. From where I'm standing, you're an ape. You're not even an ape, you're a media person. Media's like the weather, only it's man-made weather. Murder? It's pure. You're the one who made it impure—with violence, selling fear. You say, 'Why?' I say, 'Why bother?'"

Wayne: "Are you done? Right. Then let's cut the BS and get real. Why this purity that you feel about killing? Why for Chris's sake? Don't lie to me!"

Mickey: "I guess, Wayne, you just got to hold that shotgun in your hand, and it becomes clear like it did for me the first time. That's when I realized my one true calling in life."

Wayne: "And what's that, Mickey?"

Mickey: "Shit, man. I'm a natural born killer."

Wayne [hugging and patting Mickey]: “Great, man. Thanks. Every fucking moron in the world just saw that, mate.”

The scene of the prison-interview suggests that Wayne, the “normal” citizen, does not care about morality or justice any more than Mickey, the sentenced “killer,” does; contrary to Mickey’s opinion, they *are* “the same species.” On television, Wayne plays Wayne the reporter, the Wayne viewers want to see and hear, the one who confirms their beliefs and makes them feel good about themselves and safe from demons like Mickey and Mallory. Indeed, Wayne will never feel more alive than during the eventual prison riot, when Mickey gives him the opportunity to shoot and kill prison guards and inmates.

However, Wayne will become aware of his self-delusion only in the last moments of his life, before Mickey and Mallory execute him. Somewhere in the woods, in front of a rolling camera, Wayne is stalling, keeps asking questions, trying to delay his apparently imminent death:

Mickey: “Killing you and what you represent is a statement. I’m not one-hundred-percent sure what it’s saying, but, you know, Frankenstein killed Dr. Frankenstein.”

Wayne: “The day you killed, you belonged to us. To the public! To the media! We are married, right? But the point is, What do we do next? Let’s do a Salman-Rushdie-type of thing. Just books, talk shows, you know. We lay low, we jump up, we bob and weave. We do Letterman, we do Conan, we do Oprah, we do Donahue. Have you any idea how huge we could be?”

Wayne: “Wait, wait, wait! Don’t Mickey and Mallory always leave somebody alive to tell the tale?”

Mickey and Mallory: “We are. Your camera.”

What the fugitive serial killers bring home to Wayne, and also to us, the film audience, is nothing but the idea of the death of the referent. The only “real” referent—what Wayne should have known but failed to recognise—is the medium itself. Its independence and omnipotence is shocking—and all too real. However, the last scene of the film in no way comes across as a vindication of Mickey and Mallory’s supposed authenticity. Their search for the real is just as simulated as the television images of death and violence that have marked their lives. If Wayne

re-enacted real murders on his show, Mickey and Mallory re-enacted fictional murders in real life. Their simulated search for the real has been all along just a copy of the simulated violence disseminated by the audio-visual media, which brings us again to the metaphor of the facing mirrors. As Žižek also warns, “Much more difficult than to denounce/unmask (what appears as) reality as fiction is to recognize the part of fiction in ‘real’ reality.”¹³

The last scene, in which Mickey and Mallory travel happily with their two children in a trailer van, seems to fulfil Mallory’s prophecy from the beginning of the film: “I see the future. There’s no death. ’Cause you and I are angels.” They have left behind their life of murder and accepted the perfect world of the spectacle. In the metaphysical context of the film, they are now, indeed, dead. On the other hand, Wayne, whose death has been captured on film, is probably more alive than ever. Mickey and Mallory have become, like all the rest of us, what Baudrillard calls “victims of an absence of destiny, of a lack of illusion, and consequently of an excess of reality, security, and efficiency.”¹⁴ Consequently, I would suggest that the show—not the one on tape, film, or screen, but the one in which we live day in, day out—should go on whatever the cost. While ignorance is certainly not bliss, knowledge, on the other hand, involves courage, responsibility, and risk—which is probably also what Žižek meant when he wrote, “What makes life ‘worth living’ is the very excess of life: the awareness that there is something for which one is ready to risk one’s life. Only when we are ready to take this risk are we really alive.”¹⁵

¹ Eugene L. Arva, “Life as Show Time: Aesthetic Images and Ideological Spectacles” (*Film and Philosophy*, vol. VII, 2003), 110-126.

² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

³ Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, *The Matrix* (DVD format), directed by the Wachowski brothers (Burbank: Warner Bros. Productions, 1999).

⁴ David Veloz, Richard Rutowski, and Oliver Stone, *Natural Born Killers* (DVD format), directed by Oliver Stone (Burbank: Warner Bros. Productions, 1994).

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- ⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*, trans. Julia Witwer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 70.
- ⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002), 32.
- ⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* (New York: Verso, 2002), 19.
- ⁸ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 29.
- ⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 93.
- ¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2002).
- ¹¹ Benjamin, 101.
- ¹² Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*, 74.
- ¹³ Žižek, 19.
- ¹⁴ Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*, 81.
- ¹⁵ Žižek, 89.