

JEAN

BAUDRILLARD

PASSWORDS

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THE VIRTUAL

In its current sense, the virtual stands opposed to the real, but its sudden emergence, through the new technologies, gives us the sense that it now marks the vanishing or end of the real. I have already said that, as I see it, to bring a real world into being is in itself to produce that world, and the real has only ever been a form of simulation. We may, admittedly, cause a reality-effect, a truth-effect or an objectivity-effect to exist, but, in itself, the real does not exist. The virtual, then, is merely a hyperbolic instance of this tendency to pass from the symbolic to the real – which is its degree zero. In this sense, the virtual coincides with the notion of hyperreality. Virtual reality, the reality that might be said to be perfectly homogenized, digitized and ‘operationalized’, substitutes for the other because it is perfect, verifiable and non-contradictory. So, because it is more ‘complete’, it is more real than what we have established as simulacrum.

The fact remains that this expression, ‘virtual reality’, is positively an oxymoron. We no longer have the good old philosophical sense of the term, where the virtual was what was destined to become actual, or where a dialectic was established between these two notions. The virtual now is what takes the place of the real; it is the final solution of the real in

so far as it both accomplishes the world in its definitive reality and marks its dissolution.

At this point, it is the virtual which thinks us: no need now for a subject of thought, a subject of action; everything happens by technological mediation. But is the virtual that which puts an end, once and for all, to a world of the real and of play, or is it part of an experimentation with which we are playing? Are we not playing out the comedy of the virtual to ourselves, with a hint of irony, as in the comedy of power? In the end, isn't this immense installation of virtuality, this performance in the artistic sense, a new stage on which operators have replaced actors? If this were the case, there would be no need to attach any more belief to it than to any other ideological formation. This is rather a reassuring hypothesis: in the end, this whole issue would not seem to be very serious, and the extermination of reality would be anything but firmly established.

But if our world is indeed inventing a virtual double for itself, we have to see this as the fulfilment of a trend that began long ago. Reality, as we know, has not always existed. We have talked about it only since there has been a rationality to express it, parameters enabling us to represent it by coded and decodable signs.

In the virtual, we are no longer dealing with value; we are merely dealing with a turning-into-data, a turning-into-calculations, a generalized computation in which reality-effects disappear. The virtual might be

said to be truly the reality-horizon, just as we talk about the event-horizon in physics. But it is also possible to think that all this is merely a roundabout route towards an as yet indiscernible aim.

There is a positive fascination today with the virtual and all its technologies. If it genuinely is a mode of disappearance, this would be an – obscure, but deliberate – choice on the part of the species itself: the decision to clone itself, lock, stock and barrel, in another universe; to disappear as the human race, properly speaking, in order to perpetuate itself in an artificial species that would have much more efficient, much more operational attributes. Is this what is at issue?

What comes to mind here is Borges's fable of the people ostracized and pushed to the other side of the mirror, who are now merely the reflection of the emperor who subjugated them.¹ We might see the great system of the virtual like this, and all the rest as merely kinds of clones, forms of rejection and abjection. But in the fable these people begin to look less and less like their dominator, and one day they come back through the mirror. This time, says Borges, they will not be defeated. Can we suppose a catastrophe of this kind, and at the same time this kind of revolution to

1. J.L. Borges, 'Fauna of Mirrors', in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 67–8 [Trans.].

the third power? Personally, I am more inclined to imagine such a hypertrophy of the virtual that we would arrive at a form of implosion. What would take its place? It is difficult to say because, beyond the virtual, I see nothing but what Freud called 'nirvana', an exchange of molecular substance and nothing more. All that would remain would be a perfect wave system, which would join up with the system of particles in a purely physical universe that no longer had anything human, moral, or – obviously – metaphysical about it. In this way, we would have returned to a material stage, with a senseless circulation of elements . . .

Leaving science fiction behind, we can only note, after all, the peculiar irony there is in the fact that these technologies, which we associate with inhumanity and annihilation, will in the end, perhaps, be what frees us from the world of value, the world of judgement. All this heavy moral, philosophical culture, which modern radical thought has done its metaphysical utmost to liquidate after a back-breaking struggle, technology expels pragmatically and radically with the virtual.

At the stage we are at, we do not know whether technology, having reached a point of extreme sophistication, will liberate us from technology itself – the optimistic viewpoint – or whether in fact we are heading for catastrophe. Even though catastrophes, in the dramaturgical sense of the term – that is to say, endings – may, depending on the protagonists, assume happy or unhappy forms.